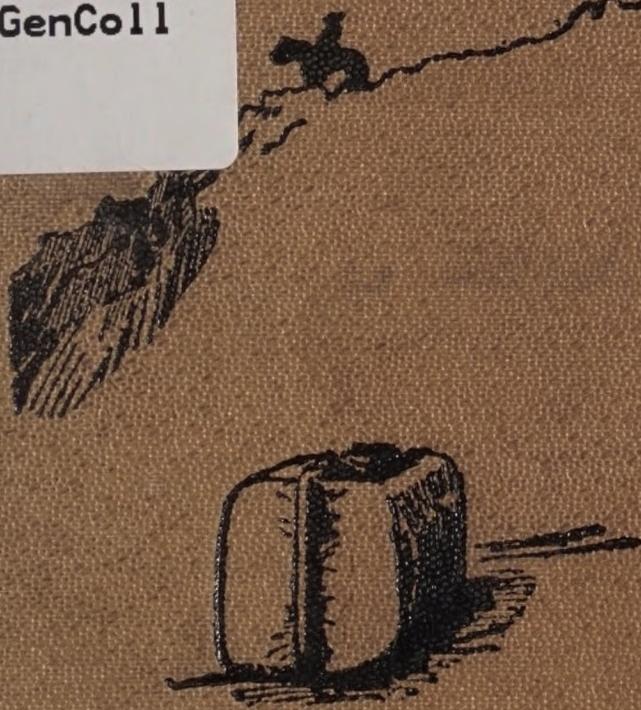




ADVENTURES OF A TENDERFOOT

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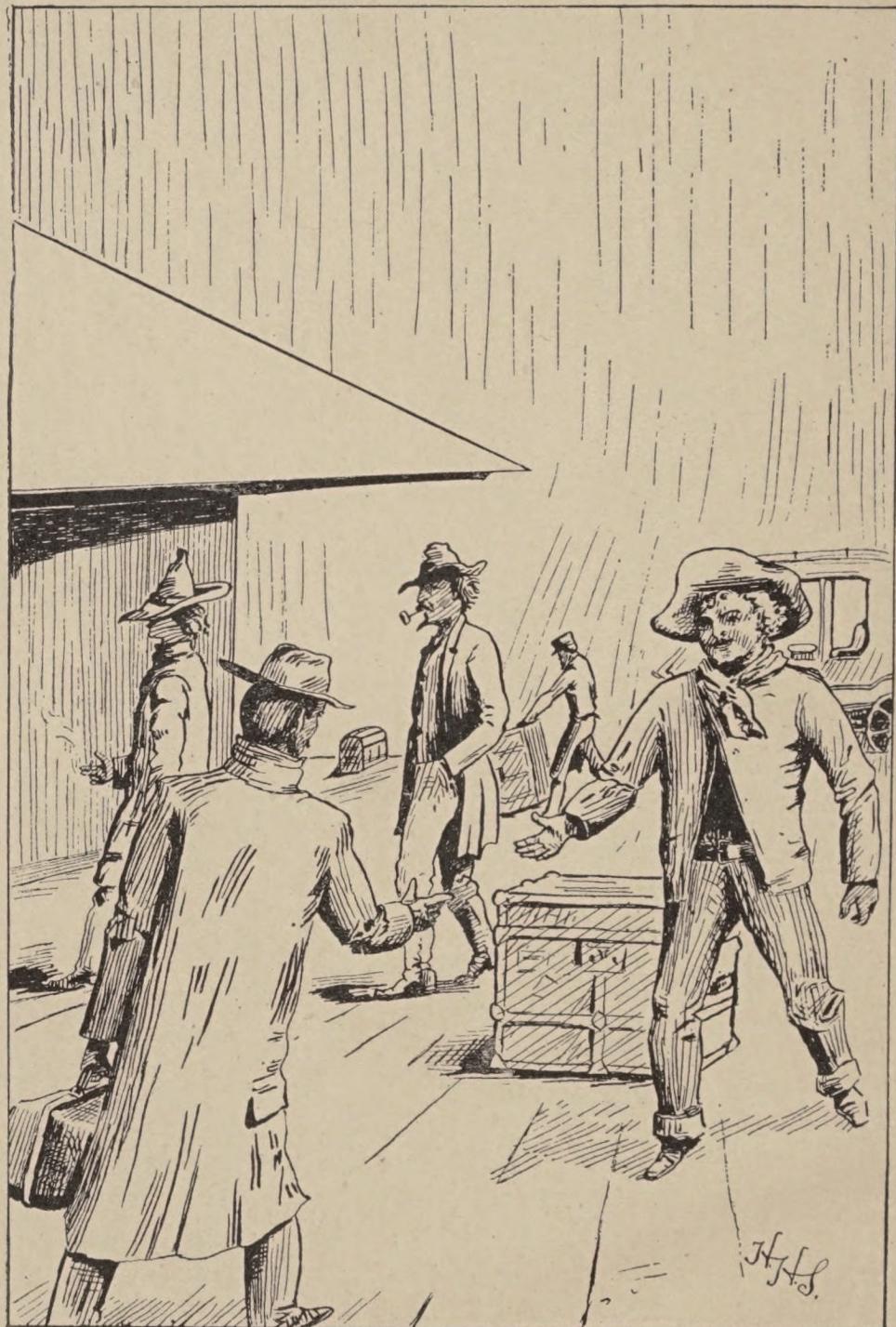


BY

H. H. SAUBER







"In a moment I spied him hurrying toward me with the accustomed smile on his ruddy face."

ADVENTURES OF A TENDERFOOT

albert BY
H. H. SAUBER.



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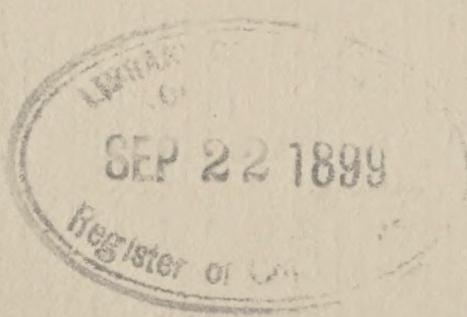
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DEDICATION

*To the memory of my dear brother
George,
my best and truest friend.*

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OLD CORKSCREW

ADVENTURES OF A TENDERFOOT.

PART I.

OLD CORKSCREW.

Mills Ferry, Ohio, Jan. 4, 18—.

Dear Cousin Tom:

You will doubtless ope wide your eyes with wonder upon catching sight of this epistle. Yet it has been but five years (including one leap year, which, for aught I know, may have swept you into the matrimonial vortex, heaven knowing—together with your humble servant—that you haven't gallantry enough to propose to any girl alive nor tact enough to escape should one propose to you) since your last feeble and undergrown letter reached me. How are you, old fellow, and with what fervor has the wind of prosperity fanned your cheek? I learned though your uncle's folks

that you are still incumbered by this mortal coil, had I not known from hard experience that the devil himself couldn't kill you—tough, twisted knot of humanity that you are!

I feel tempted to regale you with a detailed history of my career since last we crossed palms and you started for the land of gold and clodhoppers, but change my mind upon reflecting that you will toss my letter into the fire before you've read one-half of it, unless I come speedily to business. Don't start at that word, and then express your astonishment in choice anti-Sunday-school language, for I am actually in earnest. In brief, here is my tale.

Six years ago you started for California, at which time, if my memory speaks the truth, you were some three weeks my senior—feel as though I've outgrown you in that respect since. I clerked for a couple of years in the store, studied a year at home, and then entered college and settled down—leaving Dad in the mean time pretty well occupied in settling up. My standing was not so bad, my health was first-rate, and as a soph. I captured several medals on the two hundred-yard dash, run-

ning broad-jump, etc., and won my oar. With my junior year came a change. College work pressed me like the devil; athletics tied up in a double bow-knot, owing to a wholesale kick among a few sore-heads, and before two months had fled, I found myself burning the midnight oil with a vengeance, feeling weak as a rag and weighing ten pounds under my regular 170. I never was much on the fight unless I had a bone to fight for, and now that all incentive for gym. work or track exercise had disappeared, I neglected the whole game, and, as a consequence, my bookwork came harder and harder, until finally it kept me grinding like a serf to keep in my class. You can guess the rest. By spring I was a wreck, and barely succeeded in dragging out with a "section C," weighed but a ragged 155, and felt about as sprightly as a wooden horse. To make uncertainty doubly uncertain, as far as college work went, I succeeded, during the early summer, in fastening on a measly, guinea-pig sort of a cough which mightily disturbed my inner economy, and rendered me a public nuisance. That cooked my senior goose. My class moved on and left me astern. Since then I've clung to the

farm, staying as much as possible in the open air, and gradually getting back into form. Winter weather cuts me to the quick, and after receiving tons of advice bidding me go to Florida, to Texas, to the South Seas, or the Lord knows where, I have finally decided to honor California with my presence, providing I can find an opening there, with a chance to invest a few shekels with a prospect of getting enough of them back to bury me if I go under, or to bring me home if I recuperate.

You now have the object of my letter. What are the chances to get into some business in your section, that will keep me much in the open air? I have a slim thousand left from grandfather's estate to sink in the venture. Dad says that won't be enough to buy a man a hat out in your country, but I tell him I'll go bareheaded and take chances on a thousand beating a pair of bare paws even in California.

I'll bore you no further. I'm in earnest, Tom, so advise me, to the best of your limited ability, and believe me as ever,

Yours affectionately,

Fred.

* * *

Pettit's Ranch, Cal., Jan. 26, 18—.

Dear Fritz:

Your letter came to hand ten days ago. I'm sorry to hear that you're off your feed, but glad to learn that you are going to give that damned college the go-by for a while. Come to California and I'll give you a course of training that will beat your rowing and sprinting twice over when it comes to putting fat on your ribs.

I have a proposition for you. Join me this spring and I'll go you cahoots on the cattle business. That is the layout that ought to hit you about center. I've got six hundred dollars salted down and a year's wages coming, besides a good saddle-horse and outfit. Old Pettit—my boss at present—says that a fellow can get good stock cattle for thirty or thirty-five dollars a head, by going to the small ranchers on the Sacramento. A decent bronco will cost you one hundred and fifty and an outfit fifty or sixty more.

Come ahead, get your property, and I'll give Old Corkscrew the cold shoulder and we'll hang up on our own hook. I can get slathers of summer feed and plenty of winter range by herding back in the

foothills. Cattle are good property here since the arrival of the railroad.

Reply soon and let me know your play.

Your cousin,

Tom.

Better come.

* * *

One nasty, wet morning in early March, while a chilling wind vied with the slush underfoot in making life miserable, I stepped from a train onto the smoke-begrimed platform at Marysville, at which place the California & Oregon line was lying dormant during the wet season, and, dragging my car-shattered frame together, glanced at the crowd of gum-coated Californians, who gaped indolently at the motley array of human cattle being discharged from the weather-beaten coaches, or stared with half-begotten looks of admiration at the wheezing, sneezing, old engine. I looked eagerly about for my cousin Tom, the jolly, romping, curly-haired chum of my early days, and, in a moment, spied him hurrying toward me, with the accustomed smile on his ruddy face.

“Hello, Fritz!”

“Hello, Tom!”

A hearty clasp of his broad palm, and then:

“God! Fritz, you’re more lantern-jawed than ever!”

The very same laughing, swearing boy as of yore. My eye ran him over, keen for a glance at the old Tom, dreading to find a change. Yet changes there were. Fully two inches added to the old-time height, making now a good five feet seven. Less of rotundity, less of rosiness to the cheek, which, with the cleft chin, seemed threatened by a scraggly straw-colored beard. The shoulders, always heavy, were now massive, rounded by great welts of corded, knotted muscle, the large, rough hands, larger and rougher, and the sturdy legs perceptibly more bowed than when last they carried my cousin on some mad-cap prank over Ohio soil. The dancing blue eye and laughing mouth were the same, however, betokening, I knew full well, the same kind, generous, unselfish heart toward which I warmed.

“What’s your weight?” I asked, with boyish eagerness, as with grip in either hand, he elbowed his way irresistibly toward the baggage-room.

“Make a guess!”

“Hundred and seventy?”

“Nope! Missed her twenty pounds.”

“What! Only a hundred and fifty? You weighed that when you left home.”

“The twenty pounds is tother way.”

“You don’t mean to say—”

“Yes, I do. Hundred and ninety now, in work harness.”

“Great guns! A regular moose!” I cried, filled with surprise and admiration. “Have you ever been sick?”

“Not a day.”

“Sawed off four inches short, too. Why, I am six feet in my socks and have never yet beat one hundred and seventy.”

“Oh, you’re only a kid!” laughed Tom, clutching me in the ribs, then seizing my trunk check he pressed it upon the over-wrought baggage-master with an irresistible:

“Have to get this trunk at once, partner, or the stage will leave us.” Turning to me he added: “I’ll take some of the college conceit out of you when I get you on the ranch!”

Before I could toss back a counter-boast, Tom had laid hands upon my trunk, which tipped the scales at two hundred and twenty pounds, whirled it upon his immense shoulder, and crying: "Come on!" made his way toward the door and across the slippery platform, while baggage-man, porter, and lounger stood with mouth agape in astonishment, watching the performance.

A lumbering stage coach, whose six, skittish-looking horses snorted and plunged nervously at sight of Tom and the saratoga, stood at the northern end of the platform, a seedy-looking individual in long rubber coat and slouched hat seated upon the high front seat.

"You the gents for Chico? Jes' in time. Nick! Help with that there trunk. Whoa! Damme! Didn't yeh ever see a trunk before?" with a vicious jerk on a leader's rein. "Stow your turkey in under the middle seat, young feller, 'nd make that damn nigger len' a hand! I has to hold these here broncos or they'll spill the whole God damn load."

I obeyed this order, for such it appeared to be, and shoved my grip under the seat, the driver having betrayed to my tenderfoot eyes that this con-

stituted the turkey mentioned, and had just finished when a fat gentleman with shining black suit, unprotected from the drizzling rain, flashing, red scarf, and a decidedly quizzical cast of countenance limped out from the depot and approached the coach. He paused when on the very edge of the platform, spread his legs far apart (one being some two inches shorter than its fellow, this performance gave him a very grotesque poise), jerked his round hat close down over his eyes, thrust his short arms akimbo, and cast upon me a cold, dark frown. At that instant Tom came around from the boot, and I detected a smile creep over his face at sight of my unsymmetrical observer. "That's old Pettit!" he chuckled under his breath, then lifting his voice he introduced us:

"Mr. Pettit, my cousin, Mr. Thurman."

"Pleased to meet you!" I began civilly, extending my hand. But to my utter amazement the other paid not the slightest attention to this token of civility, but, instead, stared hard at me for an awkward moment and then blurted out in a harsh voice:

“It’ll take several coats of ’dobe to make a man of *you*, my duck!” and, thrusting his hands deep down in his coat pockets, turned and ambled over to where the darky, Nick, and two porters were wrestling with a clumsy crate.

“Damned old crank!” half-growled, half-laughed my cousin, who, for some reason, which was entirely beyond my ken, appeared highly amused at the foregoing proceedings.

“He’ll repent it or answer me!” I cried indignantly, for my temper was never of the coolest, and I felt that, according to my code, I had been grossly insulted.

“Let him alone!” soothed Tom, struggling hard to suppress an uproarious burst of merriment. “He merely wanted to surprise you a little, and probably the next you know he’ll be making you his confidant and tell you some secrets the balance of his acquaintance had never known.”

“Ah! I begin to see! Somewhat eccentric?” said I, cooling off.

“Eccentric? Well, I reckon you’ll have to spell that word entirely with capitals before you get it big enough for Old Corkscrew. The old cuss

spends his time doing what no one else ever did or thought of doing, just for the sake of being contrary." And this rough sketch of the old cattleman I have never, through years of acquaintanceship, seen fit to refine or soften; rather on the contrary, if possible, to make more decidedly sharp and rugged. I have had the pleasure of meeting odd characters, but never until I crossed the path of old Jack Pettit was it my fortune to discover an individual who had developed every-day eccentricity into the perfection of an art. For him it was not enough to wear broadcloth through mud and rain, or perhaps on some solitary pilgrimage into the foothills, and then array himself in the most bedraggled costume possible, even to the uncouth precincts of a cattle camp, for the entertainment of some timid and shrinking young lady, especially were the young lady a stranger; but he must shock that same young lady by a flow of language harsh, coarse, almost vile, breaking out with horrid guffaws, and grinning with ghoulish glee at every rude outburst, and then, in all probabilities, leave her presence to join a group of his unpolished cowboys, whom he would engage for an hour's

stretch with descriptions of rare paintings, beautiful landscape, or grand buildings—for old Pettit had traveled away a fortune in his day, turning every sentence with cultured precision and perhaps embellishing it with choicest figures of speech.

In half an hour we had left the low roofs of Marysville behind, and were dashing along at a good pace, up the broad valley of the Sacramento, Tom and I in the middle seat of the rocking thoroughbrace, Pettit and a wry-faced Chinaman, with their backs to the driver, in the seat in front. My cousin's employer had presumably taken this end of the coach for no other reason than that it was much more uncomfortable than the seat behind, the yellow heathen doing so through sheer matter of habit, or rather from long experience in taking, perforce, the worst of everything that was to be had.

Old Pettit did not vouchsafe a word during the first half-hour, and I had just braced myself, determined to stare him out of countenance, having already resolved in my mind that I despised him, when he quietly reached forward and with gentle hand rescued the skirt of my overcoat from outside

the seat, where it was flapping in the breeze and rapidly accumulating mud from the whizzing wheels, and tucking it carefully under the leathern lap blanket, said politely, while the kindest glance I had felt in many a day warmed his round eyes:

"California mud will soon make a wreck of that fine coat if you do not keep it well protected," and with the words he gave me one of the most pleasant smiles it has ever been my good fortune to receive. Despise him, did I say? Well! give me time to reflect!

By ten o'clock the low-hung clouds began to break asunder, leaving bright streaks of sunlight to fall upon the soaked earth here and there, and gradually swinging into rude order, crept off, like a retreating army, toward the broad river bottom on our left. Scattered battalions, left behind, fought for a time to hold their position next the foothills, but soon broke into disordered groups and went straggling off to where the main host had once more come to a firm stand in the bottom land, leaving the all-powerful March sun smiling with genial warmth over the valley, triumphant at his victory over the elements of the air.

Tom and I had a thousand things to talk about and most rapturously did we embrace the opportunity for doing so, quite forgetting the thumping thoroughbrace, with its lank driver, or our whimsical fellow-traveler and his leather-faced companion. But as the sunlight fell upon the broad plains with their verdant haze of fresh, young grass, and drew out, by contrast, the darker shades of the sturdy oaks, pensive willows or gnarled sycamores that skirted the creek banks, my eyes involuntarily turned toward the charming picture —such a picture as I have never been able to construct from the meagre conceptions stored in my otherwise fertile imagination.

Behind us, off toward the southwest, over the white banks of fog that still clung to the lowlands, rose the isolated peaks of the Marysville Buttes, standing boldly out in the very heart of the great valley. West of these, stretching away on our left, until lost in the distance before us, lay the world-renowned plains of Colusa, constituting the western half of the valley; while beyond appeared the blue-hazed outline of the Coast Range, melting from sight in the distance to the south, just ex-

posing a bare crest of the white-capped Yallo Balleyes over the curving horizon to the north. On our right, much closer at hand, appeared the lava-tinted ridges of the Sierra's foothills, every point standing out in distinct relief, every canyon shaded by its southern wall, while back of these, tier on tier, reposed the grand mountains themselves, darkened by monstrous forests, excepting, indeed, the topmost summits, whose wind-swept shoulders glistened in the whiteness of their winter coat. Straight ahead, grand sentinel of the entire valley, towered the majestic crown of Mt. Shasta. A sublime sight, indeed, for one who had dwelt all his days among the low hills of Ohio.

Before noon one incident transpired which served to testify to the accuracy of Tom's portrait of old Pettit, and, incidentally, to keep my cousin and I in a state of intermittent tittering for at least ten miles. We three had been discoursing, at some length, the possible profits to be derived from the cattle business, my part being principally that of listener, Pettit giving bits of sound, practical advice (I half believe that he knew at the time of Tom's intention to quit him!) with pleasing

candor, intermixed with the jovial familiarity of a life-long friend. At length when I had been wrought into forgetfulness of past offenses, and, in fact, had begun to look upon the old cattleman as a jolly and highly interesting old blade, he suddenly brought me up with a sharp turn by replying to one of Tom's remarks with a stony stare, after which he gave me a look of bitter contempt, and turning to the Chinaman suddenly assaulted him with a torrent of unintelligible gibberish, winding up with a harsh, cackling laugh.

"Understand that? Hey? You shovel-headed son of a yellow, cock-eyed Mongolian! That's spiced and well-seasoned lingo from the pantry of the distant Orient," and he thrust his elbows into the heathen's ribs, until the poor wretch gasped for breath, and glared about for some means of escape, absolute terror depicted on his dull features. No sooner had his persecutor ceased his attack and turned an indifferent gaze upon the passing landscape, than the Chinaman seized his bundle, which had lain between his feet, and clambered by way of the brake block to the back

seat of the coach, where he remained in a state of evident uneasiness for the rest of the journey.

After passing for several miles through a scattering wood composed principally of massive, wide-spreading, white oaks, intermingled here and there along the streaks of lowland and in the occasional creek bottoms with huge cottonwoods and graceful willows, we reached Chico at a quarter of two, and had dinner. Here the Chinaman took his leave, doubtless thoroughly convinced that he had been the companion of a madman, and two ranch-hands, both considerably more than "slightly under the influence of liquor," took the vacant seat, from which they regaled us for the remainder of the journey with a spirited (in more senses than one) debate about something, the Lord knows what, over which each experienced considerable difficulty in apprehending his opponent's meaning, at the same time being absolutely in the dark as to his own.

In the first chill of evening we alighted at a low, rambling building, partly adobe, partly wood, which stood out in gloomy indistinctness close by the road, and after a few minutes of unbuckling,

buckling, and rebuckling of the heavy straps which laced the baggage on to the boot, a number of grunted lifts, two or three outbursts of choice expletives, a shuffling about of the middle seat and of the loose baggage in the bottom of the coach, a disposition of my humble traps, together with sundry packages under Tom's or old Pettit's guardianship, in a neat heap on the veranda of the rambling wayside house, a genteel "cussing" for the two intemperate ranch-hands, a couple of lusty swigs from a black bottle tendered by the proprietor of the place, a hearty adieu to his late passengers, and the lean driver clambered to his high seat, deftly interlaced the gloved fingers of his left hand in the maze of the reins, whirled his long-lashed whip gently through the air, bringing its cracker along the off leader's ribs with a sharp "Zip!" and away went the whole lumbering concern, the sharp clatter of steel-clad hoofs resounding through and above the jolt and swirl of the heavy vehicle.

The sound of the vanishing coach had scarcely died out on the crisp evening air, when a spring wagon drawn by a span of tall mules rattled around the house from a course which led off at right

angles to the stage road, and drew up at the front.

"Here we are, boys!" cried old Pettit briskly. "Let's be off for home. It's a good four miles to the ranch, Mr. Thurman, and the night promises to be devilish chilly."

"Good avening, gintlemen!" cried a stentorian Irish voice as the driver of the mules spied us grouped upon the veranda. "It's glad the ranch'll be to see yez back, Misther Pettit. Hello, Tom! Th' byes has been closely confined to theer bunks wid one continual attack of the blues since you've been gone, 'nd a quarreling like hell the whole time a'wanting uv yer genial mug, fer to cheer thum up."

There was a ring of genuine fondness in this welcome, which surprised me none, for Tom had always been a prime favorite among his fellows at home, and our sixty-mile ride had shown me that his big heart had kept pace in growth with his ponderous shoulders.

"Lend a hand, boys!—Give us a lift with this trunk and box!" cried old Pettit, bustling about, very busy but doing nothing. In a few minutes

the wagon had received its burden and we were off for the ranch.

No sooner had the mules' heads been turned to the east than Pettit unceremoniously reached over and took the reins from the driver's hands, whereupon that worthy, who was doubtless well acquainted with his master's whims, turned to Tom, who sat beside me on my trunk, and whispered in a voice somewhat, but not a great deal, softer than the whistle of an ocean foghorn:

"Did yez lay hands upon any wet goods?"

"Gosh, Mike," whispered Tom in reply, his voice sadly earnest, yet giving me the wink as he spoke, or rather its nocturnal equivalent, a soft nudge in the ribs, "I tried to corral a bottle but got tangled in the damned streets and heard the train bellow, so that the stuff was bucked clean out of my mind, I'm d——"

"Oh! Begob, that just the Irish luck of Mike Flynn!" broke in the disappointed fellow faintly, facing about in his seat with a forlorn sigh, while Tom thrust his dogskin-covered fists into his mouth to choke down a roar. Upon regaining control of his voice he began, at once, such a

series of faltering excuses, low-spoken regrets and verbose explanations to account for the nonappearance of the “wet goods” that the Irishman was slowly drawn to the edge of absolute despair, while my cousin continued to nudge me in the ribs, pinch my leg in his vise-like grip and crunch my toes under his heel, until I verily felt that I would soon fly into a passion and punch his head for him, for my jolting stage ride, added to the previous jolting train ride, had left me thoroughly fagged out, and I felt naught but a peevish resentment at every fresh display of Tom’s everlasting jovial spirits, or fresh jolt from his iron-bound, inflexible frame.

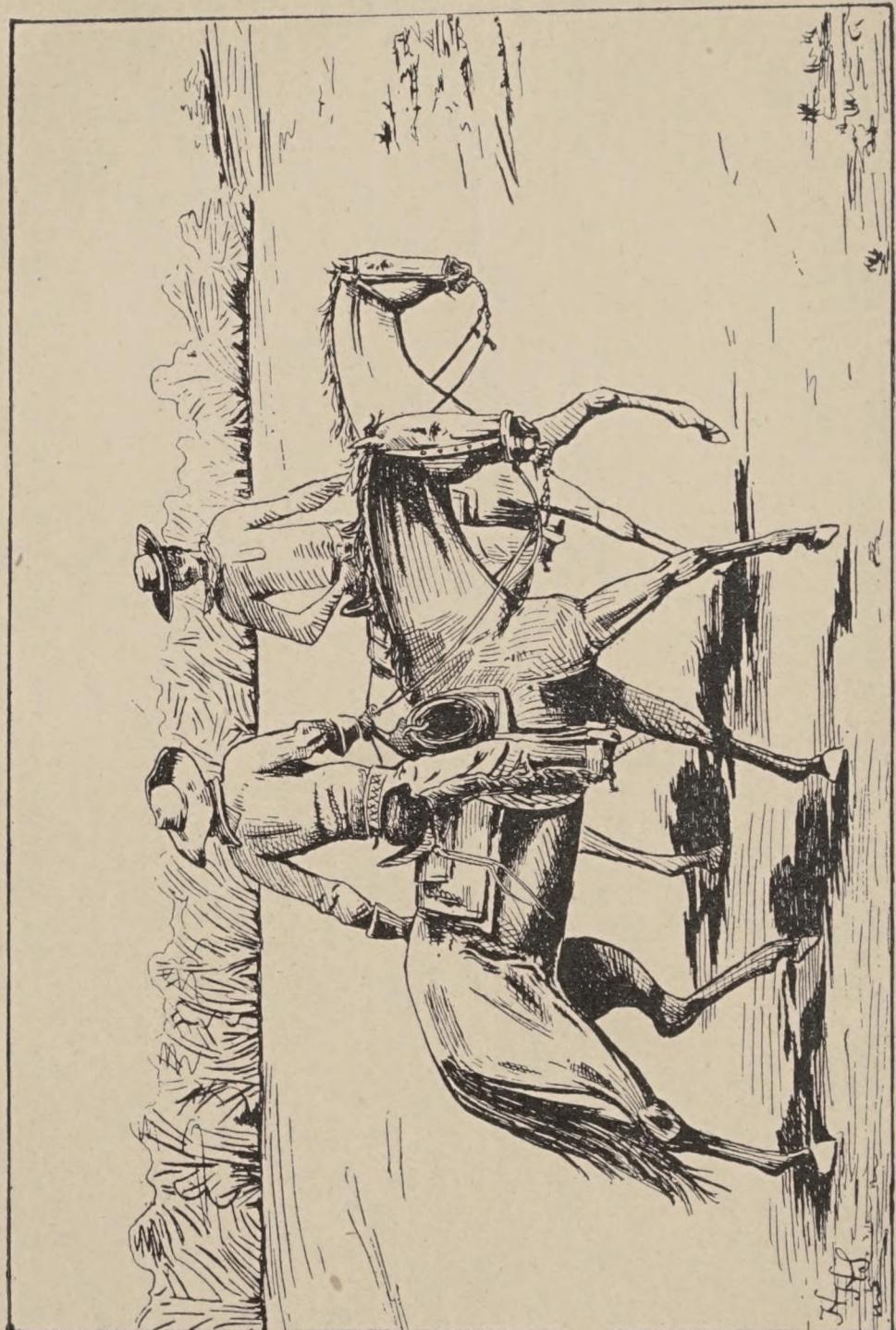
Meanwhile we were spinning along through what appeared to be a scattering wood. After a time we descended a gentle slope at the bottom of which the crunching of the wheels, together with a spectral streak of light on our right, revealed the fact that we were crossing the bed of a winter stream. Out again and across a more open stretch for a mile, and then another watercourse, this one giving back a gentle splash where we crossed. As we gained the bank beyond the deep bellowing of dogs just

roused broke upon the stillness of night, apparently coming from the region of the stream a mile ahead. Along the bank we flew, the rhythmic click of the mules' feet beating faster and faster upon the firm roadbed with each rod we advanced, and in a few minutes we were surrounded by frisking canines, one bloodhound in their midst sending forth his musical bellow to add to the general cry of welcome. Then a light flashed out ahead through an open door, a dark object loomed up before us, old Pettit snapped on his brake, snapped out a loud "Whoa!" and we were at the ranch. There was a stamping and shuffling of heavy boots on a board floor close at hand, then five or six men came tumbling out to join with the wiggling dogs about the wagon, each framed for a moment in the doorway in grotesque outline against the light background beyond, and then swallowed up in the darkness outside. Gruff voices in glad accent, hoarse voices in sour tone, rattling of tugs and breast straps, shuffling of feet, whining, yelping, growling of dogs, disjointed neigh of mules, crowding, shoving, uneasy moving of vast numbers of cattle in an inclosure close at hand, vile smell of pipes,

fragrant odor of cigarettes, questions, replies, laughter, oaths, bright light within, inky darkness without, what wonder that my senses for a time forgot their humble tenement! The mules soon struck off through the darkness in the wake of two legs, brilliantly illuminated by a lantern which vibrated back and forth beside them. A second door a few yards away opened and old Pettit limped through. A group collected at the rear of the wagon, and I heard Tom's cheery voice in their midst. Then the soft "Thub" of a drawn cork, a muffled "Here's lookin' at yeh!" then silence, then "Here's luck!" and another brief silence, a pungent smell of brandy, then—"Here, partner!" and a knotted hand thrust a long-necked bottle into my face. I managed to gulp down a spoonful or so of its contents, thus rendering my interior a scorched and cindered ruin, and pressed the bottle upon my nearest neighbor, and in the midst of my suffering I remember hearing Tom's voice pleading softly:

"Damn it, fellows! *do* leave a smell for Mike. I drove him nearly locoed by saying I came back

dry, and now must give him at least a couple of fingers," and this was the manner of my introduction to a California cattle camp.



"Spect he'll agitate the atmosphere when you straddle him."

THE BRONCO

PART II.

THE BRONCO.

“Fifteen head!”

“No, seventeen!”

“I think you are mistaken!”

“Well, dang it! Fritz, but I remember distinctly.
It was seventeen!”

“You count up, and see if you don’t find your-
self in error.”

“I’ll go you! And just for luck, let’s put up a
dollar on it. A dollar will buy my cigarettes for
a month.”

“My dollar wont!”

“Put her up, and we’ll see. There’s my silver!”

“And there’s mine!”

“Now, then, you tally, and I’ll produce the
figures.”

“Blaze away!”

“Well! We got twenty-one cows, with calves,
and nine steers, from Old Corkscrew.”

"Thirty adults and twenty-one calves—total, fifty-one."

"Eight cows and three calves from Burton."

"Thirty-eight mature cattle and twenty-four striplings—all told, sixty-two."

"Four steers from Lone Pete."

"Sixty--six."

"Twelve cows and nine calves from—What's his name? Old goat-whiskers, down on the river bottom?"

"Whimpler?"

"Yes."

"Which makes fifty-four that have attained their majority and thirty-three minors. Eighty-seven altogether."

"A gentleman from Scott."

"Eighty-eight."

"And seventeen from Stuttering Steve. That's a hundred and five! By Gosh, Fritz, I take the filthy lucre!" and my cousin seized the two coins, which we had deposited on the ground, and danced about me roaring with laughter.

It was the second of May. My first two months in California had found me at least thirty days

in the saddle, the remainder, for the most part, in old Pettit's bunk-house, where, thrown in the midst of a group of storm-ridden vaqueros, I had made rapid strides in my freshman (translated, tenderfoot) year in the great university—The West. My studies had progressed with varying success. Poker came easy, so, I fear me, did the absolute eradication of the Sabbath, but plug tobacco, cut up and dried on a fire shovel, and then used in a pipe, caused me several sleepless nights. Swearing never appealed to me as a polite accomplishment, nor did the indulgence in that sort of practical joking which throws a man out of a three-story bunk at midnight, or ejects him, head foremost, down a ten-foot bank at the instigation of a tightly drawn string, or picket rope—this last lack of appreciation on my part, by the way, having caused a temporary rupture between Jack Hayes and myself, to say nothing of the temporary excrescence that I erected on his head with the first bit of fenceboard which came to hand.

Many wholesome lessons had been learned, wholesome prices in the line of experience having been paid for the same. I had grown ten pounds

heavier, ten degrees rougher and a few grains, perhaps, wiser. A unit finding my place in the column of western figures—a molecule fitting myself into a hard lump in the world of matter.

I had found money easy to get and to forget. Easy to gain and lose, and what surprised me not a little, was the pleasing discovery that each dollar in cash was accompanied by a two-dollar credit. Thus had Tom and I secured three thousand dollars' worth of cattle for eighteen hundred dollars, besides two burros, splendid little fellows for packing, with pack-saddles and a summer's supply of "grub," and a good saddle-horse and outfit for myself. I had traded my pocket revolver and overcoat for a Winchester and a pair of dogs skin chaparejos, had won a good belt revolver at a raffle, and had slowly begun to evolve, outwardly at least, into a state of embryonic cowboyism.

Old Pettit has succeeded in giving us several surprises in spite of our avowed determination not to be surprised at anything he did. When Tom first broached the subject of our proposed venture the old fellow scoffed and grinned and called my cousin "A damned, simpering idiot!" and sought

to dismiss the matter with that, but Tom was so selfish as to press upon him a request for fourteen months' wages, whereupon the old wretch waxed furious, stormed, and shouted, swore that he would not pay over a cent and ordered Tom out of the house, all the time limping back and forth before him, his features distorted into such a devilish twist of contempt, that my cousin, at length, lost his temper and was on the point of denting the old man's head in with a poker when I intervened. Upon leaving "headquarters," for such was denominated Pettit's one-roomed shanty, Tom swore savagely, laughed merrily, and declared, at length, that he felt sure Old Corkscrew would swing round in a week's time and give us a jolly send-off. Of course Old Corkscrew could not afford to have his movements properly prognosticated, so what must he do but astonish us that very afternoon by mounting an old mare, hipped and lamenting the loss of one eye, which he kept for such unlooked-for parades, and come cantering out to a corral, located some two miles up the creek, where I was taking my initiatory lesson in the art of calf-marking, and there drawing out a greasy buckskin

purse and proceeding to count out Tom's wages in clinking yellow twenties, handing them over with the air of a prince and adding a shining eagle for "good behavior," after which he offered us our pick of cows and calves from the first bunch we should find on the range, at a price ten dollars lower per head than we could possibly have secured them elsewhere. Old Pettit's whims were not all disagreeable.

On Saturday Tom and I had reached Pettit's upper camp with our last bunch of cattle, and by Monday we hoped to strike the old Lassen emigrant trail, which left the hills at Mill Creek—a short ten miles to our north—and head for Deer Creek Meadows, where Tom assured me we would find an abundance of feed for the summer.

"Only one man ever ventures to take stock in there," explained my cousin, "and as he has sheep, and herds them principally in the timber around the valley's edge, I think we'll have the meadow land pretty much to ourselves."

"But I thought sheepmen and cow-punchers were eternally at loggerheads?" I ventured.

"Perhaps so as a rule, but this fellow as good as invited me to bring a bunch of cattle in there if I chose."

"Ah, I see. You have kept an eye to the windward."

"Yes, I've seen one or two things besides the J. P. brand."

"And supposing these renegade, throat-cutting Indians, everyone has been warning us against, should wax thirsty for human gore, would this sheepish gentleman be a handy neighbor?"

"The Mill Creeks?"

"I believe that's what you call 'em."

A significant smile flittered over Tom's face and he answered with a thrill of earnestness:

"Let me tell you that if there's a being on earth that will make a damned Mill Creek hunt his hole that being is Hi Good."

On Sunday we rode to the river bottom, where I picked me a saddle horse from a band on sale there. He was a lithe, slender fellow with a rather glittering eye, it seemed to me, and a decided tremor in the delicate nostrils, but Tom declared that he was the pick of the band, and, being one-

fourth blooded and three-fourths mustang, would make a "dick-nailing traveler" and be "tougher than whalebone." He had been broken when a three-year-old, but had now gone two years unsaddled.

"'Spect he'll agitate the atmosphere when you straddle him," grinned my cousin pleasantly, as we jogged toward the corral Monday morning, preparatory to my trying my new mount. "Maybe I'd better ride him to-day?"

I thanked him for this generous offer, but stoutly declined to accept it, remarking with some tartness that I would ride my own horse, for indeed I felt a trifle nettled at his presumption of my incompetency. I had been considered a fairly good rider at home, and my month's experience in a high-horned Mexican saddle, on the back of one of Pettit's best cow horses, had given me no reason to feel uneasy at the prospect of tackling a horse that once had been ridden. To be sure I had never seen a horse buck, but as there seemed to be nothing particularly exciting about the "pitching, spiking, or see-sawing" described in the bunk-house of evenings, with the vaquero's usual

air of nonchalance, I had been lulled into a feeling of perfect indifference with regard to this self-same pitching, spiking, etc., which wellnigh led to my complete undoing.

I noticed that Jack—for such, after an eight-mile debate, Tom and I had decided to christen the new mustang—seemed a trifle pinched and a trifle nervous, when Tom sidled cautiously into the little shed where we had left him to discourse a bale of hay during the night, but this I thought simply betrayed his mettle, a thing of which I was particularly proud. I held him by his hair hackamore rope while Tom saddled him, and when all was ready my cousin took the rope, after adjusting a loop large enough to serve me as reins, and leading him to the center of the corral cautioned me as follows:

“Now, then, be sure you are ready for business before you crawl aboard, and, by God! don’t be all day hitting the saddle when you once get your foot in the stirrup. Keep a stiff leg and freeze to the cantle.”

I thought he was putting himself to unnecessary trouble, but did not tell him so, for Jack was

twisting around pivot fashion through the middle of the corral, and necessitated my pivoting in like manner in order to keep on the near side of him. At last he quieted down, and after one or two efforts I got my left foot planted in the stirrup when, grasping the hair rope tightly and taking a full breath, I vaulted lightly and gracefully into the air and sat down firmly—yea, forcibly—in the very center of the corral, while Jack, after kicking a bushel or more of loose dirt into my face, dashed toward the gate. Tom headed him, however, so, wheeling, he plunged forward at a mad run and circled several times around the inclosure, stopping finally with an abruptness that ploughed the dirt high in air and, facing me, gave vent to a loud, whistling snort of defiance. When I brushed the dirt from my eyes and rose to a sitting posture I discovered my cousin Tom sprawling with the most shocking indecorum upon the ground by the corral gate, making the fence posts clatter in echo to his startling peals of laughter, and digging up the earth with his spurred heels in a very ecstasy of delight. I tried to find something hard to throw at him, but owing to the force with which I had de-

scended upon mother earth, every clod within a radius of twenty feet had been pulverized and rendered unfit for mortal weapon, so after a moment's fruitless fumbling I arose and started with set teeth toward Jack. To my surprise he made no attempt to escape, but suffered me to recover the rope with no more marked signs of disapproval than a soft, catlike sidestepping and a delicate trembling of the sensitive nostrils, his bright eyes watching my every movement.

"Better let me try him!" called Tom, rising to the dignity of a standing posture when he saw that I was preparing for another trial.

"Mind your own business, will you?" I snapped back.

"He'll break your damned neck!" replied he, reassuringly.

"Very well, when he does you may ride him," I returned ungraciously. I succeeded in making the saddle this time, thanks to the lesson taught by my previous disaster, and perhaps a little to my stubborn determination, and by good luck got both feet squarely in the stirrups; but I had not the tenth part of a second in which to congratulate

myself upon this bit of good fortune, for the sinewy brute contracted into a hard knot and vaulted into the air to such a height that I thought vaguely of reaching out for a star on which to steady myself. Down he came, stiff-legged, with a thud that nearly snapped my head from my shoulders; then — jerk! plunge! and up again before I could gasp in a breath, and you may be sure I was in need of one, that first jolt having crushed my lungs dry. Once, twice I remember of soaring skywards (Tom reassured me afterward with the assertion that I “stuck him for four jumps”), then there was a sudden side-flirt, an extra wave in the pliant backbone, a swift revolution through space, and I lay flat on my back, this time actually immersed in a miniature milky way.

I am as determined as most young fellows, yet I know when I am whipped. I knew it now. Jack had whipped me, and by the time Tom had reached my side, I was over my snappish humor and ready to confess my overwhelming defeat. This I did with as brave a smile as I could muster, but Tom was such a big-hearted fellow that he knew the time for laughing was past, and soon put

me once more on good terms with myself, smoothing over my downfall until at last it began to appear almost in the light of a victory. He brushed me off tenderly, swore at Jack, declared that he was the most vicious bucker he had seen in a year and expressed a fear that he, himself, would be floored if he tried him.

"Go get my saddle off Buster and I'll tackle him," he said at length, after I had found the use of my legs. I did as requested, but found on re-entering the corral that Jack had broken the hackamore rope and was trying effectually to keep out of Tom's reach.

"Have to rope him, I reckon," said my cousin, smiling as ever, but with a ring in his voice which I knew meant trouble for Master Jack. The riata was secured, and after a couple of throws its swishing loop soared gracefully over the excited animal's head. As he felt it tighten across his throat he made one desperate rush for freedom.

"Look out!" cried Tom, and I sprang aside, as I saw my cousin brace himself on his sturdy legs, with the lariat pressed around his hip. The horse reached the end of the rope, there was a thrill in

the braided rawhide, a rigid knotting of the muscular neck and heavy wrists of my cousin, a scrambling plunge, a heavy fall, and Jack lay stretched in ignominious helplessness at the end of the singing rope, while Tom stood grasping the other end in grim triumph, a pillar of tensed muscle, magnificent in his strength. In a moment the rigid tension of face and neck relaxed, suffering the usual merry smile to light up his pleasant features, and, loosening the rope so that the discomfited mustang could rise, he cried:

“I think I can adhere to the gentleman now. Crack-the-whip is a little new to him. Whoa, nice fellow! That’s a beauty! Don’t try to paw my hat off now! Bring my saddle, Fritz! Whoa, boy, a little patting won’t injure you! Be careful! Here! Hold him! If he tries to act funny, choke him down. Now, lad! Ah! boy! Steady! Here you go! Stay with him, Fritz! Whoa, Jackson! this cinch won’t hurt a pretty horse like you! Pshaw, no! Hell, no!” And cooing, whistling, patting, rubbing, warning, threatening in the blandest manner possible, Tom soon had his own saddle set and cinched, after which he maneuvered

for a short time and at length succeeded in mounting him. Jack evidently, very speedily, came to the conclusion that this soft-spoken, hard-limbed fellow who now bestrode him was no tenderfoot, or else he realized, all at once, that he had taken ample exercise that morning, for, to my surprise, and I doubt not to Tom's entire satisfaction, he started briskly forward after a few seconds of balky indecision, at a pace which gave cheering promise as to his future worth, in a measure predicting truthfully the splendid saddle-horse that he afterward became.



"Jose, a grim but faithful old Spaniard."

THE TRAIL

PART III.

THE TRAIL.

Wednesday morning, May 5, and such a fresh, calm, health-inspiring May morning as California only can glory in, when broad plains of dew-kissed grass and flowers stretch in restful variation of upland and lowland, creek bed and gentle swell, from rocky foothills to heavily wooded river bottom; the higher benches, touching the toes of the Sierras; yellowed by myriads of awakening dandelions; the richer land, nearer the stream, streaked and spotted by great armies of richly coated poppies; while between the legions in yellow and the legions in gorgeous orange, whole battalions of outposts flecked the landscape—timid bluebells creeping to the edges of miniature ravines, sly Indianheads peeping out from between rocks, facing the hosts on this side or on that, laughing buttercups holding undisputed possession of knolls and banks, chivalric larkspurs commanding platoons of admir-

ing field lilies, while the rugged gillias, with rusty blue helmets, scouted the rough borderland between plain and mountain. Through the balmy air, scented by the sweet breath of morning, floated the lark's glad song, carrying with it savors of clover and dewdrops, while close to the flower-jeweled earth playful bevies of twittering linnets dashed hither and thither like joyful little messengers of peace and contentment.

Before the lordly sun had glanced over the rugged shoulder of the mountains to dissipate the freshness of early morning by his unconquerable gaze, my cousin and I had driven our little band of cattle from Pettit's upper corral and started them toward Deer Creek's fringe of wood, with the hearty adieus of cowboys ringing in our ears. Old Pettit did not bid us adieu—oh, no! He had accompanied us to the corral, together with a group of his men, dressed in his greasiest coat and mounted upon a magnificent chestnut stallion, had superintended the packing of our two burros, directed us how to head our band into Deer Creek's ford, given us some generous hints as to the best mode of driving, and, in short, had acted the true friend

and experienced counselor out and out. Consequently, nothing would have seemed more natural than for him to have bidden us a good western “So long!” at parting. This being the natural thing to do, of course he did nothing of the sort, but instead, turned on his followers, the moment Tom dismounted to open the creaking old gate, and swore at them for delaying to “tend to other people’s business”; then, wheeling his stallion, rode off toward the hills without a glance to the right or left. The men paid no attention to the old fellow’s gruff attack. Joining together, they gave us a merry start; then, after riding with us for a quarter of a mile, each gave us a cordial hand-clasp before turning to gallop off in the wake of their whimsical boss.

Tom, mounted on Buster, and I on my new friend Jack, had a pretty busy time for the first two hours in keeping certain homesick members of our flock from parting company with their distrusted fellows and starting helter-skelter for their old homes, leaving Jose, a grim but faithful old Spaniard whom we had engaged for the summer, fully occupied in towing the discontented pack

animals along in the rear, hustling the slower members of the band, and rolling and smoking a never-ending succession of cigarettes.

About eight o'clock we reached the bank of Deer Creek, at the old ford, a half-mile below the open jaws of the canyon, and here our first real skirmish took place. The stream, swollen by melting snows, swept by with a rush and a roar, presenting an ominous passage.

"B'gosh! she's a good ten inches higher than she was a week ago!" said Tom, riding to the bank and eyeing the turbid water keenly. "If a calf gets into that ripple below his name will be trousers."

"How deep do you think it is?" I inquired, for the water was too muddy for one to determine.

"Deep enough to swim anything but old bull or those tall steers, I reckon."

"Great guns!" I cried, in consternation at thought of our short-limbed donkeys. "What will become of our grub?"

"Have to unpack and tote the pantry on our saddle horses," replied Tom briefly. More serious to his mind seemed the problem of crossing the cattle, so he spurred his horse into the stream and

found it, at the deepest part, nearly midside on his horse, and so swift that he had to ride to the farther bank before attempting to turn.

"Mak' a dey calves go aboov—aboov!" said Jose, as he wrapped his bridle rein about his wrist and proceeded to roll a fresh cigarette.

"Suppose they get under the big ones?" I ventured, for indeed, such a result seemed very probable to my mind.

"No!—no!" ejaculated the Spaniard, shaking his head vehemently. "Dey float—dey kick—dey bellow! De beeg ones keep dem from swim away off. Give 'em whoop! Altogether. See?" and he tossed his arms in the air as though shoving the whole band into the stream in one lump. His reasoning seemed good. Tom declared it was just the caper, so, after thrashing the donkeys to one side, where one immediately went to sleep, while his mate fell to browsing on the dead twigs of a fallen sycamore, we began circling the band in order to work the calves out on the up-stream side, Tom and Jose dashed upon the calm-eyed creatures, slashing them with their quirts and giving vent to vociferous whoops in the most approved

cattle-driving style. The calves, startled by the sudden onslaught, bawled in alarm. The anxious mothers bellowed in sympathy and crowded against each other, trying to reach the sides of their discomfited offspring. Yearlings tossed their tails in the air and rushed pell-mell, some this way, some that, while two three-year-old steers, to add to the general excitement, locked horns in mortal combat on the outskirts of the band. Jack, whose conduct since Monday had been most exemplary, now seemed to feel all at once that something unusual was expected of all hands, and, in accordance with this belief, he proceeded to buck me off into the very middle of the surging mob. This was more than some of the wild-eyed steers could withstand, and, with a whistle of alarm, half a dozen of them plunged into the water and made for the opposite bank. Others followed, and by the time I had righted myself the stream was spanned from bank to bank by a jam of red bodies. Jack was easily captured and remounted. I had just stoutly declined to follow Tom's laughing advice to "spur him in the neck," when I beheld one of the youngest calves drifting helplessly toward the boiling rift below the herd.

"Here! Look here!" I cried excitedly, but my cousin at that instant struck the spurs into his horse's side and plunged past me down the bank, loosening his lariat as he did so. I pressed forward in my excitement, fearful that the little creature would be lost, for indeed it did seem as though the swirling waters would engulf their victim. It reached the upper suction of the rapid and shot forward with increased velocity just as Tom's long rope circled deliberately over his head. Ten feet more and another circle of the rope, then, just as the tired little head began to bob up and down in the first step of the rapid, the lariat cut the air like an arrow and dropped its spread loop in a circle around the bobbing head. A quick jerk—a struggle in the water, and Tom was towing the calf safely and steadily toward the other bank.

"Bully for you, Tom!" I shouted, too full of joy at the rescue to remain silent.

"Gude trow! Gude trow!" cried Jose, his swarthy face grinning approval.

Under the skillful manipulation of Tom and the Spaniard it required scarcely ten minutes to unpack, transport baggage and donkeys to the far-

ther side and lash the burdens once more firmly in place, after which we clambered up a steep ascent on the north side of the stream, and found ourselves on a high, rocky plain which skirted the foothills for miles before us, broken at intervals by the oak-covered bottom-lands of winter streams. This open and comparatively level ground gave us a good opportunity for drilling our recruits in the art of marching, so that ere noon, by dint of much spurring and hard riding, and more or less supplementary swearing, we had succeeded in getting our squadrons into an orderly column, several of our broad-horned steers taking readily to the rank of file leaders, while old bull, together with some of the soft-footed calves, soon displayed marked aptitude for filling the position of stragglers.

Shortly before twelve o'clock our little army filed down a crumbling, cliff-like embankment which overlooked the broad, chaparral-covered flat of Dry Creek, and came to a halt in a little opening on the farther bank. Near the edge of the opening stood a rude, one-roomed cabin, with a large stone fireplace, before which we dismounted.

"Hi Good's camp," explained Tom, gazing musingly at the weather-beaten structure.

"Ho, ho!" I exclaimed. "Our Indian-hating friend, who suffers us to be his summer neighbors in Deer Creek Meadows?"

"Indian-killing fiend would fit him better," replied Tom. "Yet he is as tame as you or I when among his paleface mates. Grandma Griffith says he's a 'regular Chinee Wall a'twixt we'uns and the Mill Creeks!' and I believe the old lady hit the nail on the head pretty damned straight."

"More of a Spartan wall, I should say, judging by the isolation and insecurity of his castle. Do they ever try to ambush him?"

"Well, yes, they have tried it, when he first ventured to interfere with their midnight raids, but Sandy Young swears that they've never set a trap for him yet but he's shot and scalped from one to five of the gentlemen before the deal was out."

"Killed and scalped?"

"Yes, sirree."

"Scalp them?"

"You may gamble he does."

"What for?"

"More than I can say. Maybe for revenge—maybe for pastime."

"Is he boastful?"

"No. Not enough to satisfy a fellow's curiosity, especially a soft-hoof like you."

"Oh, dry up! Does he scalp them all? I mean, all that he plugs?"

"Well, I don't know what you'd call all, but dam' me if I haven't seen this very shack half-full of Indian hair—it gives a fellow the buck ague."

"Oh, put her easy—say a quarter full."

"Do you wish me to name time and place? If I said half, I still hang to the loggerhead."

"Well, this becomes decidedly thrilling. You never said anything of it before."

"Thrilling? Say, Fritz, I'll bet a horse there's a scalp in there now. Let's look?"

I was startled by this proposition, but was burning with awed curiosity, so we tossed our reins to the ground and entered the cabin. I let Tom precede me, for I felt a degree of awe at the thought of the lonely hut and its renowned proprietor that I would have been reluctant to confess to my steely-nerved cousin, Inside were table, bedstead

and stools, much the same as I had seen in other California cabins, several cans and empty cartridge-boxes kicking about the floor, but nothing, you may be sure, that was worth carrying away. My confidence returned at sight of these familiar objects, but in a moment Tom drove a shower of icy chills down my backbone by crying triumphantly:

“Here they are, by gosh!”

I approached him, and there, sure enough, hanging beside the fireplace, dried and wrinkled, were three strips of human skin, decorated with mats of coarse, black, greasy hair. We gazed at the gruesome objects for a moment in silence, and then Tom remarked, grinning with palpable delight at my look of horror:

“Pretty little mantel ornaments, hey? Wonder if the captain would care if we took one each for a keepsake?” and he reached forward as though seriously bent on selecting one, at which I swore at him and hurried from the cabin, he following, convulsed with laughter.

By this time Jose had started a little “Injun fire” of dried chaparral, taken the lunch kit (des-

ignated by Tom as “the pantry”) from the packs, and had placed the grinning black coffee-pot upon the flames. I was more fagged from the morning’s ride than I cared to acknowledge, so threw myself on the ground in the dense shade cast by a large, full-leaved manzanita, but Tom, after rolling a cigarette, strolled off through the chaparral to see that none of the cows were successful in coaxing their tired babies off to secure hiding-places in the brush.

After dinner and a half-hour’s rest in the shade, my cousin and I mounted and headed our band out of the creek bottom, and thence through the scattering oaks toward a broad, treeless, V-shaped slope two miles ahead. Allowing the cattle to feed it took us two hours to reach the line of gnarled and sickly-looking oaks that marked the upper border of the slope. Tom now pointed out the dimly discernible road over which Peter Lassen had conducted the first party of emigrants to enter the Sacramento Valley from the north. It was a mere ghost of a road. Few if any wagons had seen this route since the last creaking old ox-schooner had rumbled into the valley some time in the ’50’s,

and, indeed, at the present day, it seems almost incredible that wheeled vehicles ever pursued such a break-neck course and got through with spoke or felloe to tell the tale. It is now used entirely by stockmen who use pack animals when driving their herds to and from their summer ranges in the mountains, and is fittingly styled "the Lassen Trail."

Following along the dim, rock-bordered track, we soon found ourselves on a boulder-strewn ridge, whose northern side dropped off in a series of almost perpendicular slides to Mill Creek, while to the south the dreary ridges and ravines became noticeably steeper with each mile we advanced. We made about eight miles during the afternoon, pitching our camp for the night near an oozing spring at the upper end of one of the innumerable canyons which wound off toward the west, growing steeper and rougher until swallowed up at length in the deep, dark gorge of Mill Creek. Back of the spring was a rocky point, and to the left, running parallel to the ridge, was a dense thicket. With these barriers on two sides we experienced no difficulty in holding our stock during

the night, especially as many of them were leg-weary and quite ready to rest. To be secure, however, we had Jose take his "turkey" and seek a place of repose beyond the rocky point, while Tom and I spread our blankets under an oak on the open side nearest the camp, where, with the rhythmic, if not melodious, croaking of a family of frogs in my ears, I soon fell into a sound sleep.

The next morning we were in our saddles by an hour of sun, swinging our band up the open hillside of Twenty Mile Hollow. This is a broad canyon with gently sloping sides and a minimum of steep gullies and impenetrable thickets, up which the trail winds for some four miles, before crossing and clambering up to the rocky backbone to the south. We did not cross there; however, but held on to our course, directly up the Hollow, expecting to find good feeding ground at its head. We were not disappointed. Three miles above the crossing the Hollow ended in a broad, rounded basin, on whose sides there was an abundance of grass. The entire stretch of foothills thus far, though rocky and scant of soil, afforded no mean pasture at this season. On the ridges, it is true,

the lava, barren and desolate, often lay exposed to view, like the projecting vertebrae of some starved monster, but along the sloping sides and in the numerous coves and basins a good growth of wild oats, bunch grass and alfilerilla sprang from the light soil, finding shelter beside the innumerable boulders, or beneath the outspread branches of chaparral, manzanita and buckeye.

We halted until three in the afternoon, having found plenty of cold water for camp use in a cave just over the brow of the ridge on the Mill Creek side. While lying on the shaded slope of the basin, our stockman's instinct rejoicing in the sight of the fattening herd, we whiled away an hour or more in repulsing imaginary attacks from thieving Mill Creeks, finding considerable amusement in the diversion, but, ere night had blanketed the earth in darkness, our laughter on that subject had been effectually checked.

We wished to make Burnt Corral for the night, a camp which Tom thought lay about a mile within the pine timber. The trail was exceedingly rough and narrow between the head of Twenty Mile and the pinery, the last three miles being along a crook-

ed "hog's back," hemmed closely on either side by dense thickets, numerous specimens of the birch, dogwood, pepperwood and burr-oak beginning to appear in the impenetrable mat of brush as we neared the timber; and it was not without a hard struggle that we pushed our band through. Once within the timber, however, under cover of the majestic pines, and the difficulties of the trail ceased. Here was no constriction in our course —no stiff-limbed chaparral brush, no burnt lava under foot, nor hot sun overhead. Instead, the trail was as broad as the rounded back of the ridge itself, with plenty of breathing room, driving room and running room. The lagging cattle increased their pace and seemed no longer bent on giving us the slip; the horses pricked up their ears and sniffed the balmy breath from the pines, shaking off their fatigue with surprising alacrity upon feeling the damp, soft carpet of the forest under foot.

Yet Tom's mile lengthened into a long two, and the deep, silent forest was fast becoming shrouded in the darkness of night ere we reached the old log enclosure known as "Burnt Corral." As the

leading cattle filed down the steep pitch just before reaching the camp, I saw Tom spur out to one side and face about in a position for counting them as they passed. I followed along in the rear of the band, and as I approached him I noticed his eyes fall upon the last stragglers and then dart quickly back, as though expecting more. His eyes met mine and I saw trouble.

"Some gone?" I inquired anxiously.

"One," he replied, holding up a finger, and glancing hastily back along the trail, as though in hopes of seeing the missing critter lagging behind.

"Oh, pshaw! you made a miscount," I said, reassured. "It's mighty easy to do when they go as irregularly as they did here." I delivered this opinion with the air of an expert, having heard old cattlemen discourse thus, for, to tell the truth, I had, myself, essayed to count our little flock a hundred times in vain.

Tom shook his head and replied decisively:

"No, sir—I got a fine count on 'em. There was no hustling—they all went slow and kept up a steady lick till they got clean past."

"Well, if you're certain—I suppose you are!"—

but I don't see how a fellow can tell on such a count. It's mighty near dark, too."

"Well, I think I can make a dead shot on a bunch like this, and I tell you there's one gone. Let's ride down and see if we can miss any of the markers."

"Old bull's on hand—and the little lame steer," I said, as my eye ran the band over. The cattle came to a halt in the glen where Jose had started his fire, close by the corral, and we looked them over carefully, as we worked them slowly into the enclosure.

"We had them all in the head of Twenty Mile, for I got a good count as they took the ridge this side, but I'll bet a horse we're one short now," said Tom, as the last of the tired bovines shambled slowly through the opening in the rude log fence.

"Maybe one of the sorefooted ones dropped out in that thick brush just below the timber," I ventured.

"That's about the size of it," replied my cousin. "I tell you what we'd better do. Jack is fresher than Buster. I'll stay and help get the chuck, and you ride back as far as that first thicket below the

pinery. Keep your eye peeled and maybe you'll find it back here a piece. Whenever they drop out from sore feet, they generally try to follow up as soon as the band is out of sight. Better ride pretty damned fast, for it will soon be dark."

I hurried away as soon as he ceased speaking and urged Jack into a lope on gaining the top of the first two-hundred yard ascent. The short twilight was fast fading away, and I knew full well that the coming night would be doubly dark in that dense timber. I kept a sharp lookout as I rode, expecting to catch sight of the delinquent every minute, for I could not believe that one had been left far behind. The further I rode, the more convinced I became that Tom had made a miscount, and at a little open swale, in whose waning light the surrounding forest appeared cast in more gloomy darkness, I came very near turning about and giving up the search. I knew it to be close to a mile to the edge of the pinery. After a momentary hesitation, however, I concluded to go as far as Tom had desired, so clapping spurs to my horse, galloped forward once more into the timber. Jack had splendid wind, and, without slacking rein, I,

in a few minutes, emerged from the last knot of pines, and clattered down the narrow, rocky trail between thickets of dreary chaparral, beyond.

Suddenly Jack stopped short, with a snort of terror. I spoke to him and glanced apprehensively around. My utter loneliness in that wild region struck a dull chill through my heart, as my eyes fell upon the wilderness of brush and boulders that surrounded me. Jack stepped nervously to one side, and as he thrust his nose forward and toward the ground, I perceived that something in the trail ahead must have frightened him. I strained my eye to catch sight of any unusual object, but could distinguish nothing excepting the dim opening in the brush which marked the trail. I touched him gently with my spur, but he pressed tremblingly to one side and behaved as though about to wheel in his tracks. The dying light over the far distant Coast Range, where the sun had sunk from sight, still threw a patch of somber gray upon the western sky, and this being directly in my front, I suddenly caught sight of a spot of brightness in the trail, ten feet ahead. It looked like the dim light reflected from a pool of water.

I dismounted to examine it more closely, holding Jack's rein tightly clutched in my hand, for I had no desire to be left afoot in that spot with a weird sense of danger tugging at my heart. Yes, it was certainly water, a blotch as broad as my hat in the middle of the trail, with a thin ribbon leading off into the brush on either side. I stooped and felt of it, but recoiled with a shudder as the cold, clotted stuff slipped through my fingers. It was blood.



"Old Bull *** came to the rescue by deliberately stalking on to
the glistening crust."

THE NIGHT GUARD

PART IV.

THE NIGHT GUARD.

Tom's count had been correct. One critter had dropped out on the last stretch of the dismal, lava-capped foothills, and here was its blood besprinkling the trail, within one hundred yards of the refreshing pines. I think that I am no more cowardly than the average of mankind when a known danger confronts me, but my imagination is one that springs from a standstill to a mad gallop with one bound. Possible danger, coupled with dark mystery, unnerves me. For a moment my flesh crept with terror. My eyes sought to pierce the foreboding gloom, that seemed to press with such awful silence upon me. It was for a moment only; then I mastered my boyish weakness, forcing the current of my thoughts into a more normal course. The thought of Jack's presence gave me a feeling of comfort. I grasped the handle of my six-shooter and derived a sense of security from the

touch. The horse's alarm seemed to have been inspired entirely by the blood that lay in the trail. What should I do? That it was the blood of the missing animal I never for a moment doubted; how it came to be shed did not enter my mind.

The ribbon of blood, as well as I could discover in the growing darkness, appeared to lead into the brush on my left, so I determined to push out in that direction a short distance, hoping soon to find the straggler, either dead or wounded. All thought of personal danger had now left me; instead, I had become only anxious to discover the object of my search. The chaparral was scarcely five feet high, and I had advanced into it some forty or fifty feet, when suddenly my horse, whose reluctance to follow I detected by the resistance upon the rein, threw his head to one side and gave utterance to a shrill snort of alarm. At the same instant I heard a crackling of brush on my right. I paused and listened, but no other sound reached my ears. Jack still kept his trembling muzzle turned in that direction, however, and my judgment told me that the sharp, quick noise I heard had not been made by a tired or crippled steer, and

then for the first time a vision of Mill Creek flashed through my brain. In an instant I was in the saddle. Wheeling about, I let Jack pick his way back to the trail, thence up the rocky ascent to the towering pines. Once on the comparatively level ground, however, swallowed up in the blackness of the forest, and my spurred heels instinctively pressed his sides. Jack was no thoroughbred, but I have never yet seen the track champion that I think could have hung on my flank during that two-mile run back to Burnt Corral.

It was with a decided feeling of relief that I at last caught a glimpse of the flickering firelight playing among the black tree trunks, that towered above the hollow where the corral lay, no spot having ever seemed to me more secure and homelike than the rude bivouac, lighted by the brisk camp fire, or no friends more dear than my cousin, the swarthy-faced Spaniard or even the sleepy donkeys that stood blinking in sociable proximity to the snapping blaze.

"Ahoy, shipmate!" sang out Tom as I approached. "Just in time for refreshments! Better take your bronco down below the corral and hobble him by old Buster. Any luck?"

While unsaddling I briefly told my story. Tom's face became serious.

"Mill Creeks, sure as hell!" he exclaimed, on hearing the completion of my tale. Then turning, he seated himself by the spread canvas, mechanically pouring out a cup of coffee, and, after taking a gulp, continued grimly:

"By jingo, fellows, we'll have to keep our eyes peeled, or we are liable to find ourselves successful candidates for the boneyard before morning."

"Are they apt to tackle us?" I inquired, by no means delighted at the prospect.

"They are not apt to tackle anything that they know is looking for them, but let them find us off our guard and they'll head us toward the happy hunting ground with a running start."

"Then we'd better take turn standing guard?"

"No; we'd better all sleep with both ears open and one eye ajar."

"Why not keep guard?"

"Well, Fritz, we're in for a summer's campaign, and the sooner we learn to sleep on the watch, the better it will be for our constitutions. We're already forty miles from the edge of nowhere, and

every step takes us farther. Don't you know this is a sandy game we're playing from start to finish, and sand is something that the Mill Creeks don't dally with."

"Supposing they steal the horses?"

"They'll never make a sneak on a horse—smell too loud. If they try any night work the broncs will be our best friends, for they'd mighty soon rouse the camp."

Old Jose did not seem to comprehend the possible jeopardy that menaced us, being a stranger to the northern part of the state, and thus knowing nothing of the atrocities of these renegade Indians. Tom tried to dissuade him from sleeping in the open moonlight, but all in vain, and at last my cousin ceased his remonstrances and growled out to me, as the stolid Spaniard shouldered his blankets and trudged out from under the pines to a little open spot some fifty feet away:

"Let him go! Let the old cuss go! He'll have to smoke about ninety-nine cigarettes before morning, and maybe when he sits up after the moon rises and finds a nest of arrows sticking through him in different directions, he'll begin to think the Mill Creeks are not to be sneezed at."

As for us, my cousin and I made our beds down in the densest shadow to be found close at hand, and very carefully placed our rifles and six-shooters by our sides. Once during the night I awoke with a jerk and sat bolt upright. The moon had been up for about two hours and was casting her mellow rays slantingly through the forest, lighting up strips of the glen here and there, leaving the shaded portions darker by contrast. What had startled me? There, a few feet to my left lay the muffled form of my cousin. Twenty yards down the glen stretched the logs of the corral fence, their white sides gleaming where the moonlight fell upon them. All quiet within the inclosure. No rush. No alarm. Only the muffled grinding of the ruminating cattle. I lay down again. After a time I heard the dismal howl of a wolf, floating in mournful cadence through the forest, and shortly afterward a movement among the cattle, which whetted my attention, but gradually the mysterious night softened its myriad whisperings and again I slept.

After breakfast the next morning, Jose and I started the cattle up a long hill over which the trail

led, while Tom rode back to investigate the blood-stains I had seen, and to find, if possible, the missing cow brute.

"About four miles ahead you'll come to The Narrows," said Tom as he mounted, "and just beyond, on your left, will be as good picking as you'll find. Swing the band out there and let 'em feed."

"When will you overtake us?"

"Don't know—guess you might expect me by ten o'clock."

Neither of us mentioned the Mill Creeks, but our thoughts were on them, nevertheless. As my cousin turned to ride away I swallowed the lump rising in my throat, and called after him:

"Hadn't I better go with you?"

"No. You stay with the cloven-hoofs. I'm afraid old Greaser can't drive and smoke cigarettes to advantage, at the same time. Don't worry about me. I'm good for a full-hand bluff with the Mill Creeks."

Yet it was with a strikingly weak feeling about the heart that I saw him disappear among the towering pines, his jovial manner and merry whistle quite failing to bring moisture to my throat, or

drive away the dread presentment of danger that preyed upon me. I knew that it was a childish apprehension—one that should be stifled outright, for even were there danger in the search, our position made it imperative that it should be faced. Had I taken Tom's place and ridden down the narrow trail, my mind would have been much less perturbed, but shuffling slowly along in the rear of the lumbering band, my fancy found ample space in which to soar. I had killed my cousin off in divers ghastly ways, the horror of each slaughter far transcending and o'ershadowing its predecessor, and had discovered, with blood-curdling reality, his scalped and mangled remains in no end of shocking attitudes, ere the sharpening ridge and the deep canyons approaching on either side, betrayed to me our proximity to The Narrows. In a few minutes I was riding down a gentle decline, a veritable scallop in the summit of the ridge, and, looking ahead, beheld the leading cattle beginning to string out in single file, over the thin backbone, two hundred yards ahead. To the right miles upon miles of the deep and rugged canyon of Deer Creek lay exposed to view, but Mill Creek's gorge, to the left, was hid-

den by the heavy timber of a bended ravine that led from a grassy swale that hugged close to the very crest of The Narrows.

I tried to spur ahead in order to turn the leaders off the trail, as Tom had directed, but found on the left an impenetrable mat of buckbrush and manzanita, while to the right a gulch dropped off, a sheer precipice from the very edge of the trail. The trail itself offered my only avenue of advance, but this was full of cattle. When I finally crowded through, on the heels of the band, however, I found that the leaders of their own accord had turned to the left, and were soon spreading out in good feeding order through the birch and service brush, where, with the tender shoots from these shrubs and the various species of forest grass, that had made a good growth since the last snows had melted, they managed to secure a tolerable breakfast.

As I halted beside the trail, waiting for the last of the stragglers, my heart gave a bound, as I spied the sturdy form of my cousin, apparently unscathed, and surely unscalped, riding beside Jose. In a moment I was by his side. Success and fail-

ure was his report. He had found the missing animal, a two-year-old heifer, but the Mill Creeks had forestalled him. In short, after examining the bloodstains in the trail, he had made a search and quickly found the carcass of the heifer lying some two hundred feet away in the heart of the chaparral, had made out that she had been shot fully a dozen times with arrows, and, after being dragged down, had been butchered with savage ingenuity, every pound of flesh and a portion of the viscera having been carried away, leaving only the bones and tattered hide to serve as a means of identification. But one or two tracks could be discovered in the thin soil, and these had been made by the bare foot of a large man. Further search revealed signs indicating that the marauders had passed westward into Mill Creek canyon.

"I don't believe they'll tackle us," continued Tom, on completing his tale of his morning's venture. "I'm satisfied, Fritz, that they were at their damned knifing job when you were there, and, of course, if they were they either saw you or heard you. What better chance could they expect to have for giving you a shot? They know our

strength to a dot, and the fact that your saddle is still warm shows that there's a small gang on this lay."

"Suppose they join a larger party in Mill Creek and decide to follow us?"

"Then our scalps may need cinching a little tighter." This cheerful rejoinder was like Tom, yet, withal, I could not but feel a sense of relief upon learning of the apparent weakness of the "gang" that had shown such aptitude for snatching up stragglers from our drove.

We nooned at a little spring which burst from the hillside close to the trail, and it was two o'clock before our long-horned steers began rising from their cool beds in the shaded glen above, where the entire band had camped upon leaving the feeding ground in birch. We contemplated stopping for the night at what Tom termed Summit Camp, in order that we might cross the belt of snow, which we knew lay just beyond, in the early morning. About three miles above our noon stopping place the ridge began to grow steeper and more dreary. The birch, service and buckbrush took on a dwarfed appearance as compared with the

same shrubs of the lower regions, the new shoots upon the ends of the limbs having scarcely begun to show their heads, fearful of the cold air in that high altitude.

As we ascended, the more succulent species of shrubs dwindled away entirely, with the exception of the hardy buckbrush, while great patches of snowbrush, a shrub totally unfit for browse, began to appear scattered over the cold, grassless floor of the forest. The snow plant, too, began to peep up here and there, a bright red spot in the midst of dull surroundings, while occasionally we passed blotches of snow upon which the older cattle gazed with careless interest, but which the calves approached and scrutinized with round-eyed wonder.

It was dark by the time we reached our camping place, when, to our utter dismay, we found, in place of a strong corral, only a mass of charred logs. Some one, either carelessly or purposely, had burned it. I doubtless looked my consternation. Jose spat out a newly-lit cigarette and went stoically to work rolling another. Tom gave vent to curses, both "loud and deep." What was to be done? The cattle were not tired and began al-

ready to wander off toward the glistening streaks of snow that lay on all sides of us in the gloomy woods, made restless by the light, chilling air of evening. I was dog tired and felt that I would gladly surrender my claim to California and all her loose-jointed cow brutes for a hot supper and a comfortable bed. What did a man with a spark of common sense ever—. But my tenderfoot reflections were cut short by Tom, who, after swearing himself out of breath, heaved a tremendous sigh, then, after a moment's silence, broke out merrily as a lark:

“Well, we'll have to shove the brutes up against a snow bank, where we can hold them till morning, and be damned to them,” and he gave me a slap on the shoulder that nearly knocked me out of my saddle.

“Better go slow,” I snarled savagely. “What d'y' want to jolt a man's head off for?” and for the moment I wondered how people could see anything jolly about my rude and boorish cousin.

“Oh! I'll get a sheep's head for you when we get to Deer Creek Meadows,” replied Tom, chuckling with glee at my exhibition of temper.

"Well, keep your hands off, or I'll break your jaw!" I retorted, at which Tom absolutely roared with laughter, as he galloped off through the woods, to bunch the cattle, preparatory to driving up against an unbroken belt of snow. We advanced a half-mile before finding a place suitable for our purpose, by which time blackest night was upon us. Stumbling forward over the fallen timber which covered the saggy earth, we at length got our discontented band into a sort of pocket in an immense bank, where, with a cold, glistening barrier on three sides, we allowed them to stop, purposing to build our fire in the middle of the fourth side.

All hands, man and beast, were by this time cold, tired and hungry. I helped Jose unpack and then rode toward where the fragrant smell of a cigarette told me that my cousin was stationed. He now joined the Spaniard, and in a moment I heard a breaking of sticks, and was soon cheered by seeing a tiny flame flickering among the trees. This soon grew to a comfortable blaze, but an hour passed, during which I had to ride incessantly back and forth across the five hundred feet of boggy

woods, shouting, whipping, hustling the shivering cattle back into their cold corner, ere Tom had finished his supper and come to relieve me.

“Better curl up and go to sleep when you finish your fodder,” said my cousin, as he tossed me a heavy canvas coat. “I’ll rouse you about midnight.”

I was thoroughly chilled, so hugged close to the smoking fire while eating, and on finishing my meal of hot bread, bacon and coffee, immediately began casting about for a comfortable bedroom. In order to keep the provisions off the snow-soaked ground Jose had placed the packs upon a log next the fire. There being no feed of any kind in the vicinity, the donkeys, together with the Spaniard’s saddle-horse, were tied to trees for the night. The Spaniard had taken his blankets and disappeared while I was eating. I determined to leave Jack saddled, as Tom said that he would keep warmer thus.

After stumbling about for some time, trying to discover a dry spot on which to spread my bed, I at length gave up in despair, and, dropping down at the foot of a large pine, decided to roll myself in

my blankets and sleep as best I could, sitting with my back against the tree trunk. Soon the fire simmered out, and, as I had by this time worked my blankets into an inextricable mass, in trying to get between them, I was compelled to go and coax it back to life, before I could straighten them. At length I managed to worm my way in among them in such a pleasing fashion that while my body received tolerable warmth my length prevented both my extremities from sharing this comfortable state at the same time—first, my spurred and booted feet jutting out into the cold air, as I pulled the covers up about my ears; then my face and neck being bared, as I attempted to festoon a bachelor's tuck about my heels. Crouching, with my shoulders cramped between two knotted excrescences that defaced the trunk of the pine, clutching Jack's rein tightly in my icy hand, calling down maledictions upon the head of the man who invented the term “cowboy,” I at last fell into a troubled sleep.

Oh, the blindness of frail humanity! Seldom cognizant of that indefinite state, popularly designated “Well enough”—seldom satisfied with it

when known! On going to sleep in that dark forest, cold and fatigued, I felt that my fate was, indeed, most miserable; in fact, the only satisfaction I remember to have derived from my situation was in the firm conviction that I was by long odds, the most wretchedly unfortunate creature on earth; yet before morning, I could look back upon that same forlorn bed with a longing heart, and think upon that knotted pine as a most enviable haven of rest.

I had slept several hours—Hours? Minutes surely!—when I was dragged back to consciousness by a strong hand-grasp on my arm, and Tom's voice in my ear. I sat upright, as best I could in my tangled blankets, wondering if it were morning, but in a second a cold splash of water in my face left me startlingly wide awake. Rain was pouring down in torrents.

"Guess you'd better get up and give us a lift," said Tom, almost apologetically, though he, brave fellow, had been doing the work of two for half the night. "The cattle are trying to drift with the storm, and—I tried to hold 'em, but can't. Old Buster's about petered."

All thoughts of further sleep for that night were out of the question. I scrambled to my feet, shuddering as the cold rain dashed against me, driven by the fierce wind which came howling off the ice-clad mountain to the east, and caught distinctly the sound of a shivering, long-drawn moan, and the restless clatter of cloven hoofs, telling, but too plainly, that the band would scatter broadcast through the black forest, unless guarded with the strictest care. Tom remounted and passed on, calling back as he moved away:

“You hold them on that side of the camp. Keep them bunched as much as possible, or they’ll”—but a furious blast swept the remainder of the sentence away on the bosom of the storm. I climbed stiffly into my cold, wet saddle, and began my first night’s experience as a cattle-guard. Back and forth, back and forth I rode, crowding the drenched creatures into their uninviting corner, only to find them turning about each time, with heads away from the storm, drifting, drifting out through the black, bleak woods.

I did not speak with my cousin again during the night, though I heard his stentorian voice rising

at times above the tempest, and, at last, when tardy daylight began to cast a pale, sickly light over the eastern sky, and I was ready to fall, in utter exhaustion, from my saddle, he drew rein beside me, and I noted, with surprise, that he no longer bestrode Buster, but was mounted upon Jose's roan.

"Buster was about to go under," replied Tom to my anxious inquiry, "so I concluded I'd spell him. This fellow won't have so much to do to-day as our plugs."

"I thought Jose was cranky about letting others ride his mustang?"

It was just light enough to betray the significant grin that played over Tom's strong features. "He imagined he was until I convinced him that this was not a good climate for cranks," and turning about, as he spoke, my cousin rode back toward the camp.

The wind had slackened by this time, leaving the great, cold rain drops cutting straight down from the sky, and the tired cattle were beginning to lie down in the clumps of baby firs, or next the roots of the larger pines. Ere broad daylight the

rain had ceased entirely, though a few tattered clouds loitered across the sky until noon, and, after once getting a fire started, Jose soon had a steaming breakfast spread upon the friendly log which skirted the camp. I sat down, with my back to the log, and slept like the veritable support against which I rested, until the meal was prepared, and felt immeasurably refreshed by my short nap. My cousin did not close an eye in sleep, yet, as the day wore on, I could not perceive the slightest token of fatigue in his ruddy face or muscular frame, in spite of his almost superhuman efforts the whole night through.

It cost us a lively scrimmage before we prevailed upon our reluctant band to take the snow, our customary leaders, the long-legged steers, whose sunken flanks now betokened the hunger that was fastening upon them, utterly refusing to make a start, thus leaving us quite in the lurch, until old bull, who contemplated our fiercest onslaughts with imperturbable composure, came to the rescue by deliberately stalking on to the glistening crust, the entire band following gingerly at his heels. The night's rain had played said havoc with the sur-

face of the snow, softening it so that the heavier members of our herd sunk to the fatiguing depth of six inches, thus rendering our passage extremely difficult. All signs of the trails were buried, but our self-selected file-leader plodded steadily forward, over the rolling banks, following the natural trend of the mountain, which Tom declared was a positive improvement on the traveled course. We expected trouble from the diminutive feet of our pack animals, but soon learned that the shrewd little beasts picked out, with unerring accuracy, the firmer banks, and, withal, managed to keep "afloat" better than the clumsy bovines. Tom and I walked the entire breadth of snow, in order to give our mounts a respite, but Jose, true to the instincts of a lifelong vaquero, rode every step of the way.

Upon nearing the summit, and, as we were beginning to congratulate ourselves upon a successful, though hard-earned passage, a calamity occurred, which somewhat dampened our spirits—though truly we needed dampening of no sort after the night's experience. While tramping along, with Jack's rein over my wrist, trying to keep to



one side of the course cut into a slush by the feet of the cattle, and dragging the rim of my sombrero close down over my eyes, in order to shut off as much as possible, the dazzling glare from the sunlit snow, a sudden plunge and struggle drew my eyes to one side, where I beheld one of our largest steers struggling hard to regain his footing, having plunged through the thin crust that covered a fallen log. As I approached, to render any necessary assistance, he made a tremendous effort and cleared the treacherous opening, only to sink down on the snow beyond. As he plunged forward one of his hind legs flung out loosely to one side, revealing the fact that the limb was fractured close to the hip.

Tom now approached, and I read the loss of our best steer in his blanched face.

"Have to feed him to the coyotes," he said, gravely, after a brief examination. "Even if we could splint his leg he'd starve before we could get him to feeding ground." He paused, then in a moment, turned to me, his usually strong face working with emotion, and said, half-pleadingly, "You give him a shot, won't you, Fritz? I can't."

My heart went out in sympathy to my boisterous cousin, who, a giant in the midst of strength, was a child when confronted by weakness. A lump rose in my own throat, but I swallowed it forcibly and determined to do what was plainly a duty, realizing that while it was a hard task for me it would be an impossible one for big-hearted Tom. For a moment my quaking heart prompted me to commission Jose to do the deed, but I put down the desire, feeling, somehow, that I was making a sacrifice for my tender-hearted kinsman, and a sacrifice by proxy were like one's prescription taken by another.

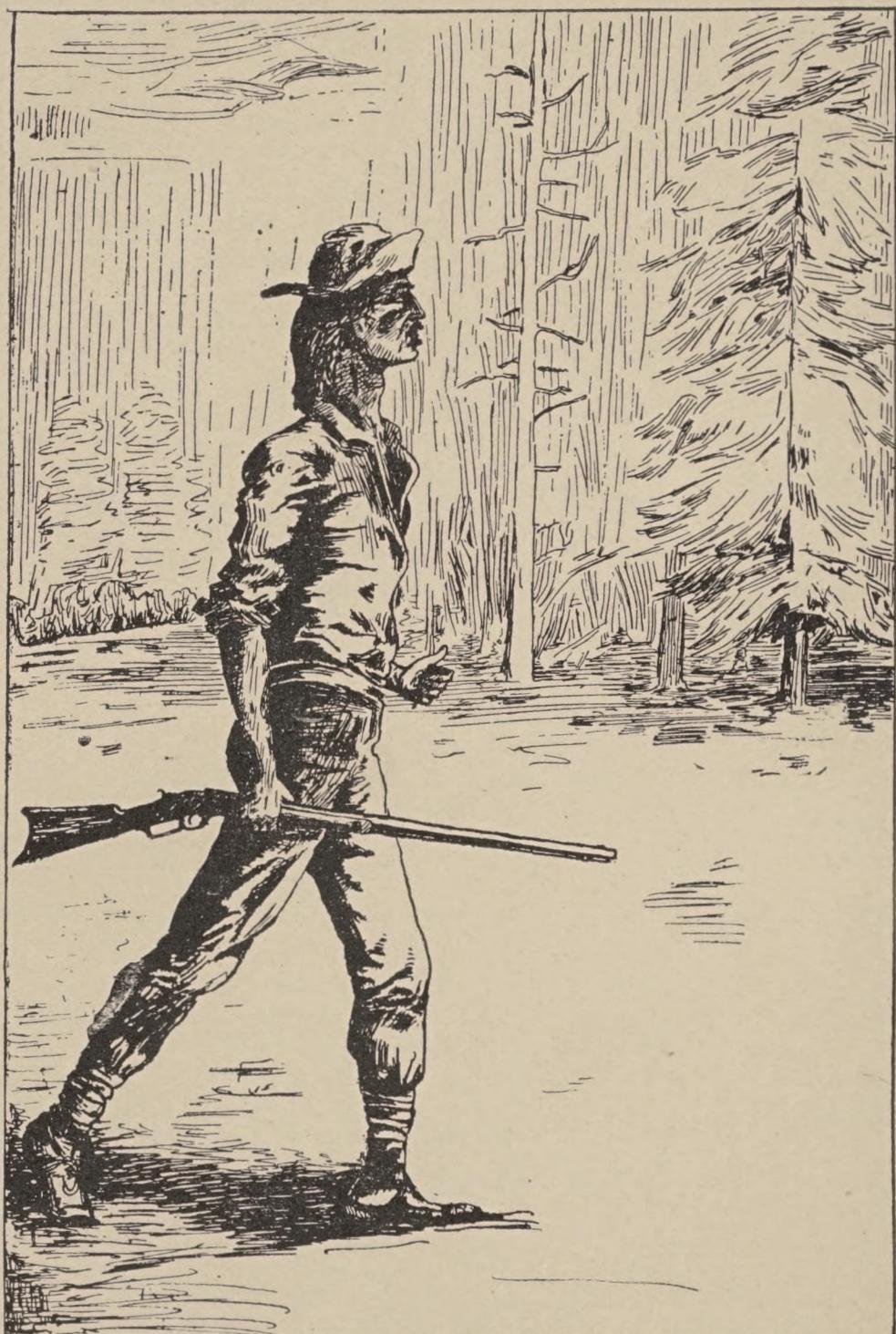
After the others had passed from sight, up the mountain, I crept into a clump of firs, whose tops protruded some feet above the snow, leveled my rifle at the broad forehead of the suffering animal, pressed the trigger, and then, after one horror-stricken glance at the quivering body, turned and staggered up the mountain, my limbs tottering with weakness.

Ere I had overtaken my friends the top had been crossed, and the cattle were filing down a long slope beyond. The snow was deeper and

firmer here, and in a half hour we were skirting Onion Creek, a small stream, but one at present most difficult to cross, being bounded by jutting snow-banks, rising in no place less than ten feet straight up from the gurgling, ice-cold water. Our fears regarding the crossing were soon set at rest by old bull, who, with the nonchalance of a practiced traveler, passed a short distance down the stream, and then, turning, stalked out upon a rounded bank, which proved to be a natural snow bridge, over which he led the entire band in safety.

For many miles after this the descent was gradual. Our course lay through heavy pine timber, and the snow lingered on in almost unbroken bodies until we reached Round Valley—a little vale lying like a wide-open eye in the heart of the dense forest. After this we found the snow only in ragged patches. About four o'clock in the afternoon we found ourselves descending gradually into a great, broad canyon, which seemed, rather, to be creeping up to meet us. Soon we were next a boisterous stream, fringed by dark thickets of slender tamaracks, betassled here and there by knots of rustling poplars, and in another half-mile a broad,

mountain-encircled valley spread out, with arm to right and left before us, cool groves of tamaracks and clumps of pensive willows dotting its soft carpet of verdant green—our summer's home, Deer Creek Meadows.



"We beheld a tall, lithe figure advancing."

MILL CREEKS

PART V.

MILL CREEKS.

Alone in the forest, with the fresh, sweet breath of the pines, and the subdued murmuring among the myriad dark-green needles far up in their tops, playing upon the senses with strength just sufficient to accentuate the silence of early morning. No song of birds. No chirping of squirrel or chipmunk. The damp earth yet unwarmed by the spring sun. Nothing noisy or frivolous, all grand and solemn, a fit setting for the lordly forest trees.

I had left camp early to ride along the bank of Deer Creek, and, after reaching the "lick," a half-mile upstream, had turned my back upon the valley, and worked my way gradually up the mountain side to the east, drawn by the solitude, which made my heart expand with a strange yearning, as though suffocating in its narrow confines in the midst of so much that was sublime. Below me, skirting the base of the mountain on two sides,

lay the verdant meadow lands—a smooth expanse of dark-green velvet, smiling in the morning sunlight, with the limpid stream, meandering across its bosom, now sparkling in crystal brightness, where it caught the slanting beams, now shaded to a deep black, as it crept under the pensive willows that lined its banks, or beneath the denser shadow of the groves of tamarack. To my right lay that part of the meadow, which, starting northward to meet the larger stream, became lost in a tamarack swamp less than a mile above our camp; to my left stretched the longer arm of the valley, much of its grassy surface hidden from sight by the numerous groves. Directly opposite me was the low cleft in the encircling hills where the Lassen Trail entered the valley, and from thence, borne on the stilled air of morning, came to my listening ear the distance-softened roar of tumbling water, as it entered its sixty miles of wild canyon.

At my feet a thin coil of smoke, playing above the treetops, indicated to me the position of our camp, while the picturesque knots of cattle, feeding in contentment upon the meadow here and

there, filled my heart with a feeling of complete satisfaction.

Hark! Suddenly a rifle booms, down somewhere in the swamp—once—twice—thrice, in quick succession—and I wheel my horse just in time to catch the long-drawn shout of my cousin, as it mounts into the upper air from the clumped tamaracks a mile below. Even at that distance, I cannot mistake his stentorian voice, and I feel positive that he is signaling for me to join him.

The mountain was steep, and Jack plowed deep furrows in the loose soil as he half-slid, half-scrambled toward the bottom. In a few minutes I had reached the valley, crossed the creek, and was thrashing about through matted thickets of weak-stemmed tamaracks, swarms of mosquitoes, singing about my head, roused up from the rank grass that grew in the soft and yielding ground underfoot. Soon I found myself in an almost inextricable mass of tangled underbrush, while the taller trees, bent by the weight of winter snows until their tops touched the ground, formed veritable arches overhead, their luxuriant growth of foliage shutting out the daylight and leaving the stagnant

pools, touched by the filtered rays, foreboding and gloomy beneath.

I shouted to ascertain the whereabout of my cousin, and, after listening a moment, heard his answering whoop issuing from the depths of the swamp off on my left. An impenetrable thicket confronted me on that side. I essayed to pass round its border, and immediately found myself over a miry bog, covered with flattened limbs and tree-trunks. Jack was soon floundering helplessly, and to save him from sticking fast, I sprang from my saddle, attempting to gain a footing upon a bunch of prostrate saplings. The slender things sunk under my weight, however, excepting one, indeed, which snapped asunder and shot a dried limb stinging into my face, and the next moment I was tottering to keep an upright posture, at the same time experiencing the delightful sensation of cold mud and slime oozing into my boot tops and creeping up my legs. Forty feet of this, and then came firmer footing. Again I shouted, but this time Tom's reply came from my right. I had advanced in a curve. I ground my teeth together, and, changing my course, once more advanced.

The matted overgrowth opened—I gave a sigh of relief on catching sight of the blue sky—then closed again, and once more my course became doubtful.

I at length halted, and was on the point of giving vent to my disgust in a yell of fury, when I heard a crackling in the thicket ahead, and in a moment spied Tom, not fifty feet away, peering through the uncertain light in my direction. I picked my way toward him, still leading Jack by the rein, and growling out anathemas on the swamp and all its accessories, but was stopped short by his unusually solemn:

“For God’s sake, Fritz, draw in your horn!”

His tone silenced me, and a moment later, on catching sight of the firm-set muscles of his stern visage, all thoughts of my peevish discontent were driven from my mind, while a chill of foreboding ill crept through me.

“What’s up?” I asked, apprehensively, and Tom replied with suppressed excitement:

“The Mill Creeks again!”

“The Mill Creeks?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know? What have they done?”

“Come here!” and he led the way toward a spot where the network of trees opened in a measure, overhead. Soon I spied Buster, standing with rein on the ground, and over beyond him beneath the low-drooping branches of a broad tamarack a prostrate object, huge and dark. Surely not a log! No!—there is blood—great pools of clotted gore—a whole side of naked ribs, bloody and grawsome—a shaggy head with long, curved horns. Another minute and I was standing beside one of our best steers, half flayed and butchered.

For a moment we gazed in silence on the stark carcass, then Tom muttered, with savage vehemence:

“Ain’t this hell?”

“When did they do it?”

“Do it!” repeated my cousin, “they’ve done it since sundown yesterday.”

“How do you know?”

“By the blood and hide. Besides I’m dead sure I saw this fellow feeding down by camp last evening.”

"How did they get him into this beastly swamp?"

"It's only fifty yards to the edge over there, and some of the cattle have been feeding up here every night. It's warmer than on the open meadow."

Meantime I had walked around the body, and noted how the flesh had been hacked and torn from the side that lay uppermost, the under side being unmutilated and not even divested of the skin. The vast pools of blood had not yet been drunk by the moist earth, while the deep hoof-prints, where the huge creature had struggled and died, appeared so fresh that a feeling of imminent peril, for our own safety, gripped my heart. However, I succeeded in putting my boyish weakness into the background, where, by force of will, aided to an appreciable extent by the excitement of the day, I managed to keep it suppressed during the thrilling experiences that followed.

"If we can once get Hi Good in their wake, they'll quit the beef business till he gets through shooting, at least," said Tom, fiercely, and, remembering the many stories I heard of Good's prowess, my blood grew decidedly warmer. Of course, we must

enlist the services of Hi Good. Had we not ventured into this remote mountain region, only on feeling assured that the famous Indian fighter was to be our neighbor?

In a few minutes I was left alone in the swamp, while Tom rode away in search of the sheepman. My manhood had, by this time, so far mastered my fear, that, after burying Jack in a thicket of small trees, and posting myself in a well-protected ambuscade, with the carcass of the slaughtered steed in full view, I managed, with creditable coolness, to dispatch divers redskins as they advanced, in my imagination, toward the dead animal from every conceivable recess of the surrounding marsh, only succeeding in giving myself a realistic start on locating each new point of debauchment for an unkempt, slinking savage.

I had been thus laudibly engaged for upward of an hour, and my senses were beginning to tire of their monotonous environments, when a crackling in the swamp set me on the alert. In a moment I saw Tom approaching alone. He had ridden to Good's camp, and found no one there but a stolid-faced Indian boy. This lad, so my cousin assured

me, could speak English fairly well when he chose, but, on the present occasion, could scarcely be made to give a single intelligible answer to Tom's anxious queries. At length, after my cousin had ridden a mile up the valley to where the captain's sheep were feeding on the meadow's edge, and, disappointed in his quest, had returned to the cabin, the stupid Indian had managed to blurt out that his master had gone to Big Meadows, and would not return until night. We were consequently thrown upon our own resources, for twenty-four hours would kill a Mill Creek's trail even to the acute senses of Hi Good.

Tom, grim-visaged and determined, was for following the trail as best we could, in the hopes of overtaking the marauders and giving them a taste of lead. I demurred, arguing that we would run the unpleasant risk of rushing into an ambush; but Tom contended that the renegades never employed this method of destroying their pursuers, since some of their brethren, now among the majority, had tried the trick on Hi Good, but instead lent every energy to the task of reaching their stronghold in Mill Creek Canyon, as soon as

possible after committing any depredation. The accounts of the treacherous cutthroats substantiated in general my cousin's opinion, but this day they did take advantage of the inefficiency of their pursuers, as we learned to our cost.

Tom soon carried his point, and we started. We experienced, at first, much difficulty in following the trail, and it was high noon ere we emerged from the swamp, and entered the heavy timber on the mountain side to the northwest. Here it became evident that the Indians had made no attempt to conceal their tracks, for we found the evidences of their passage clear and fresh, and set out, at good speed, in pursuit, both lacking the experience, which would have taught us to apprehend an Indian trick in every plain sign that met our eyes.

Off toward the north, skirting the foot of the mountain and keeping a mile or more from the creek we advanced, maintaining a vigilant eye on the wood about us, and dismounting only now and then to scan more closely the steep mountain-side, as the tracks disappeared on some rocky point, or became lost in the spongy surface, afforded by

broad beds of "Squaw Carpet." Tom rode ahead, bending every energy to the task of following the trail with all dispatch, while I followed close behind, my Winchester unslung, and my eyes and ears strained to the point of keenest observation. No sounds startled me, but a score of times my excited vision construed some burnt snag, some jagged rock, or shaded opening between bush and boulder into the outline of a crouching savage.

For several hours we advanced with tolerable speed, leaving the meadows behind and passing farther and farther into the somber forest, holding to the broad depression in the hills, through which Deer Creek found its boisterous way. At length, when the shadows were beginning to grow long, the trail took an abrupt turn to the right, led us down the slope of a flat-topped ridge toward the creek, and, when within twenty rods of the stream, faded entirely from sight. Long and diligently we searched, employing every tracking device that we had ever practiced or heard of, but all in vain, and, at last, filled with the uncomfortable conviction that we had been deliberately tricked, we turned our horses' heads toward camp.

Urged by the suppressed excitement within us, we struck forward at a stiff gallop, my perturbation heightened by the unusually grim silence maintained by my companion. In an hour's time we reached the swamp at the valley's edge, and caught the last rays from the sun, just sinking behind the domelike mountain, which flanked the meadow on the west. Our horses were nearly blown, but we gave them no respite. Through the dense tamaracks, avoiding the gloomy bogs, past the clumps of willows, from whose stagnant pools the hoarse croak of the marsh frog gave welcome to coming night—out upon the open meadow, with the timbered camp a mile ahead. Groups of cattle were feeding toward the snug groves, which dotted the lowland, where their night beds lay, no sign of disquietude in their midst. My eyes instinctively sought the camp, the germ of uneasiness in my heart springing into foreboding, full grown, at the first glance. There was no fire, no motion, no sign of life. I tried to remark unconcernedly that Jose must be fishing later than usual, but my throat was dry, and gave out no sound. A stolen glance at my cousin seemed to set the seal of reality to

my fancied fears. He was staring straight ahead at the camp with a look of weird intentness. Jack sought to slacken his pace, but I gave him the spur. Tom's heels were never out of Buster's flanks. Through a strip of watery ground, the galloping hoofs coming down with sharp, pistol-like reports, on to the firmer sod beyond, the sounds becoming muffled, as though sinking into the spongy earth, and into the very camp, our horses sliding to their haunches in the sudden, plunging halt. There under the big tamarack was the canvas tent, erect and taut. There the rude table, the blackened camp fire, the sturdy Dutch oven, the coffee-pot, the carefully guarded saddle-bags and grub sacks. All right? No—thrown down and empty—blotches of flour sprinkled about, and there—Great Heavens! my cousin and I sprang to the ground and started toward a prostrate human form, and at that instant both horses surged backward with piercing snorts of terror. The next moment, with exclamations of horror, we were recoiling from the cold, dead body of Jose, lying with upturned face and ghastly wide-open eyes a few paces from the door of the tent.

For a moment we stood, petrified with horror, the abruptness with which we were brought face to face with grisly tragedy seeming to render our previous premonitions of ill mere pleasurable anticipations. This was so different—so real—that, after the first sickening shock, we seemed to be stunned past the point of awe. I was not the least surprised, after an interval, to hear Tom remark, with distinct calmness:

“Well, old Greaser’s got his dose!” nor appalled to see him lean over and lay his hand on the hideous face. I could not take my eyes off the gaping mouth, nevertheless, I stepped forward promptly, and laid hold of a stiffened arm in response to Tom’s direction, but was stopped short by a deep, authoritative voice at some distance crying out sharply:

“Hold on! let him alone!”

Springing back, and wheeling about at this startling interruption, we beheld a tall, lithe figure advancing, almost at a run, from a knot of tamaracks by the creek bank, and with the first glance an exclamation of relief broke from Tom, and I heard him murmur fervently:

“Hi Good!”

What a crushing weight was lifted from my heart on hearing that name! With long strides the man approached, and as he neared us, I saw his piercing black eyes darting rapidly over the camp, embracing everything in their comprehensive glance, excepting my cousin and I. They seemed to read us without, for an instant, resting upon us. Walking straight up to the dead body, he vouchsafed but one short interrogatory, turning for the moment toward Tom.

“Cold?” and Tom replied with like brevity:

“Yes.”

Without further words he stooped and examined the body, running his hand roughly over breast and limbs, feeling of the throat and skull, and, lifting a hand and letting it fall again with a smart thud; then, after scanning the ground closely, he took hold of one shoulder, and, with a sudden jerk, rolled the body over. One keen glance at the blood-stained clothing and at the spot of crimson where the corpse had lain, and then he remarked, grimly:

"There you are! I thought so—shot in the back!"

All the time he had kept hold of his rifle, shifting it from hand to hand, as necessity required, with a familiarity that might lead one to believe that the weapon was never out of his grasp. He now questioned us respecting our movements during the day, and, after gaining such information as he seemed to desire, advised—nay, commanded—us to stake our horses while he picked up the trail. The movements of this strange, remarkable man held me with a sort of fascination, and I hastened to Jack's side and began unsaddling him, anxious to watch his every step, while he discovered signs of Jose's treacherous murderers, for that he would succeed in doing so I never for a moment doubted.

My confidence was not unfounded, for before I could drive Jack's picket pin, with feverish haste, on fresh feeding ground, the sheep-man had struck the trail, and was following it westwardly toward the heavy timber at the foot of the mountain. After advancing in a slightly zigzag course for a few rods he returned swiftly to the camp, and,

glancing anxiously at the fading light in the western sky, said hesitatingly:

"If you boys are hungry you'd better go to my shack and get a bite. Your camp seems to be strapped."

"What'll you do?" asked Tom, brusquely, noting the other pause.

"Me? I guess I'll follow the trail out to the hill and see what turns up."

Tom promptly volunteered to go along, declaring that we were not a bit hungry, which statement, as far as I was concerned, was absolutely true, for I could as easily have devoured a yearling steer at one sitting as I could have swallowed a mouthful, and I could have done either more easily than I could have remained alone in camp, with that grawsome object lying in front of the tent.

In a few minutes we were across the strip of meadowland, and in the timber at the foot of the mountain. Good moved ahead, and, though guided entirely by the sign under foot, advanced with unusual speed, at the same time devouring with hungry eyes every object about him. Turning to the left we were soon headed toward the

point where Deer Creek left the meadows. When close to the spot where the stream approached the mountain he hesitated, stopped, and then began working his way carefully back and forth over a course, perhaps fifty feet broad, at the same time telling us in guarded tones to keep back. Many minutes we stood in tense excitement, watching the mysterious woodman gliding from point to point, scrutinizing brush and rocks and ground, occasionally dropping to his knees to scan twigs or shrubs and frequently muttering indistinctly to himself. Once he moved down the hill, examined the loose soil beneath a broad-limbed fir, and, as he rose to his feet, I heard him utter a bitter curse.

At length a grunt of satisfaction broke from him, and, after a few long strides up the hillside, he called back to us, from behind a knot of saplings which screened him from our sight, "Come on, boys!" We sprang forward at his words, but, on reaching the saplings spied his tall figure gliding rapidly ahead along the side of the mountain, necessitating some lively sprinting, on our part, before we overtook him.

The trail seemed to offer no difficulties, now, and

we advanced for upward of a mile, without further pause. In spite of the remarkable swiftness of our leader's movements, the gloom of early night was, by this time, closing in upon the silent forest. The creeping darkness acted as a spur to Good's endeavors. He redoubled his speed, and finally, just as I was beginning to entertain fears that all my boasted powers as a college athlete would prove of no avail in keeping me at his heels, he again came to a halt, and, after a moment's hesitation, began darting back and forth once more, with the eagerness of a baffled hound, though this time, to my surprise, maintaining absolute silence.

Scarcely a half-minute he pressed the search, swerving but once or twice up or down the hill, when suddenly he stopped short, his sinewy form snapping up to an erect posture, his long arm thrown out toward us with an impressive gesture for silence. Fascinated by his magnificent form and bearing, I stood with eyes riveted upon him, oblivious to everything else. Then, all at once, I thrilled with new excitement, as low, yet distinct above the muffled bellow of the stream on our left, was heard the muttering of strange, guttural

voices. Several broken, and, to me, unintelligible words were spoken, as though in guarded tones, and coming from a spot directly between us and the creek, followed by a moment of silence. Then a sharp, uncanny, animal-like cry broke abruptly on the air, so close to us that it seemed at our very elbows, and we knew that we were discovered.

A fierce imprecation, like the snarl of a savage beast, broke from Good, and, bounding down the hill, he yelled:

“Let ‘em have it, fellows! Let ‘em have it! They’ll be scattered plumb to hell in a holy minute!”

Actuated by the intense excitement of the minute, I lost all thought of Tom, and dashed wildly down the hill. I crashed through a clump of small trees, hearing startled cries and swiftly-moving bodies scuttling through the undergrowth before me. Then came a blinding glare, lighting up the gloomy dusk, and with it a sharp, deadly report, a shout of ferocious triumph, and a blood-curdling scream of pain. The next minute I was running toward the creek, the fleeing figures having taken that direction, but had gone only a few

steps when a shout arose in the thicket on my right, followed by a sharp blow, a heavy fall, another shout, and then came sounds of a violent struggle. Plunging frantically through the brake, I nearly tumbled against two forms, writhing in desperate embrace, both in an upright attitude, one tall and slender, the other short and sturdy, For a moment they swayed back and forth, then there was a sudden rush, a tremendous lunge, a quick forward spring, and the tall form was tilted in air and hurled furiously among the saplings ten feet away. Tom's muscles were in action. The tall man lay for a second where he went down, and during that second another rifle shot roared out, still nearer the stream. I saw Tom snatch at his rifle, which he had evidently dropped on encountering the Indian, and then I was attracted again to the crackling saplings where the latter had fallen. As he gave a sudden twist, landed catlike upon his hands and feet and shot, a veritable black streak, through the thicket, I flung my rifle forward and fired, then sprang forward in headlong pursuit. In a few yards I was beside Good, and at that instant I caught a glimpse of the Indian,

scudding across an open spot among the clumps of trees. He was headed toward the stream, which seemed to be close at hand. Good jerked his rifle to his shoulder, but the savage was gone with the wink of an eye, and, lowering the weapon with a growl, he ran forward, straight at the stream. I followed. Ten steps brought us in sight of the surging water, at the same time revealing the fact that we were separated from the flying Indian by a dense mass of partially fallen tamaracks, which extended to the very bank. The top of a prostrate pine protruded past this barrier on the farther side, and by an almost instinctive calculation, I realized that the trunk must span the creek. Then thoughts of the steep banks flashed through my mind, and I knew that the Indian was seeking this mode of crossing. Good must have arrived at the same conclusion, but his keener eyes had told him more. Instead of attempting to pass round the tamaracks so as to bring the Mill Creek in view, he dropped quickly to his knee and thrust his rifle forward, apparently into the very mat of trees. I followed his example, and through the chinklike interstices, between the lower trunks of the bent

saplings, caught a distinct view of the great, bare log stretching across the chasm that yawned between the black banks. The upper surface of the log was above our line of vision, except that part from about the middle of the stream on, and toward that portion the grim rifle barrel was pointed. We heard a sharp rustle directly ahead of us, and my heart seemed to stand still with awed excitement. A light spring—the snapping of a dried limb—a stealthy pat! pat! on the top of the log, then a foot and ankle appeared—another foot, with half the lower leg, moving carefully, yet swiftly, along the smooth trunk, and then came the blinding flash of Good's rifle, and as the angry report re-echoed from the darkening sides of the canyon, a piteous cry and heavy plunge in the water took oath to the terrible accuracy of the white man's aim. In a second we were on our feet and running around to the farther side of the clumped tamaracks. Passing the top of the fallen pine my foot slipped, and I stumbled over an outstretched form, lifeless, but warm and limp. It was the body of the Indian who had fallen at Good's first shot. At another time the bare thought of tripping over a

corpse would have made my blood run cold, but now I felt naught but annoyance at being impeded in my progress. Scrambling to my feet and thrashing through the brake, which lined the stream in almost unbroken belts, I clutched a branch and leaning far over the bank, glanced quickly over the tumbling waters, first opposite me, then under the farther bank, seeing nothing; then my eyes swept down the stream, and I beheld a black head just breaking above the surface. Making more accurate estimation of the velocity of the current, Good had plunged into the brake farther down the stream, and must have come out directly opposite the struggling wretch in the water, for in the very instant that the head appeared, and while the swarthy visage was turned directly toward me, the deadly rifle belched forth once more its volume of flame, and Jose's murder was doubly avenged.



"I suddenly found the clinging arms of the girl wound about my neck."

A
MIDNIGHT MYSTERY

PART VI.

A MIDNIGHT MYSTERY.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“Sounds like a horse!”

“Where?”

“Out on the plains!”

“Guess you’re dreaming!”

“Your hearing must be growing short!”

“Your imagination is growing long!”

“Well, I’ll bet it’s a horse, all right!”

“Bah!”

“I’m going to listen.”

“I’m going to sleep.”

So saying my cousin Tom stretched himself restlessly on his blankets and became silent. Following tardily on the heels of the scorching September day, the night was hot and sultry. After twenty-five miles of torture, across the dazzling, blistering stretch of foothills, we had reached the

valley, just as the sun, a copper monster, slid his murderous face behind the murky outline of the Coast Range, and with lagging pace had urged our little bunch of beef cattle across the barren plain. In the dreary gloom we had drawn near the silent corral, coiled like the ghost of a huge snake on the side of a bare slope, and with signs of relief had beheld the thin-flanked steers go clattering into the hollow, to slake their thirst at the stagnant pools in the bottom. Failing to make Pettit's place, we had sought this spot, a winter sheep-camp, in the open plain, several miles north of Deer Creek.

Refreshed, in a measure, by the tepid water, but without food of any kind, we had turned our horses loose in the corral among the cattle, and had then proceeded to moisten our chapped lips with eager draughts of coffee, having unslung pack and riding outfit beside the lonely, summer-warped cabin.

To one accustomed to the refreshing air of the mountains, what is the summer night in the Sacramento valley but torment unspeakable! We spread our blankets on the level plain, some distance away from the cabin, so that should any stray waif of

a breeze come creeping along the valley we would be in a position to fill our panting lungs. But no breeze came. Never before was I in a place of such utter desolation. No trees, whispering their good-night lullabies; no murmuring of running water; no whistle of night-bird; no croak of frog, and not even the rustle of a blade of grass. The staccato squeak of the cricket, heard at dismal intervals, served only to accent the oppressive silence. Occasionally a stir over in the corral, caught my ear, or a long-drawn breath, as some gasping steer filled his capacious lungs; while my nostrils continually drank in the faint sweet odor of tarweed, which loaded the close, suffocating air.

The pulseless atmosphere, the uncanny silence, the solitude, the dead stars, staring from the leaden sky, all combined to lend an air of unearthly weirdness to the hot plain. What wonder that I listened with strained ears to catch again the sound of galloping hoofs that had startled me? It was midnight, but I had not yet closed an eye in sleep. I arose, and, in my stocking feet, walked out upon the plain. The night was dark. Off to my right, a streak of faint gray sky told me that the moon would soon be in sight.

I stood for some time, listening for a repetition of the hoof-beats, for I was certain that I had not been deceived. Hearing nothing, I was about to turn back toward the cabin, when I bethought me of placing my ear next the ground. I had dropped to my knees in execution of this design, when indistinctly I once more heard the deadened thud of a horse's feet. A few faint foot-falls—then silence. Then, after a moment of anxious listening, I again heard the sounds, gradually growing louder, as though advancing out of a depression on the plain. In a moment I could readily make out that the sounds were north of me, but whether approaching or receding I could not tell. What could bring a rider to that desolate plain at midnight? This thought was taking vague form in my mind, when suddenly a low tremulous moan crept through the darkness, growing gradually louder and terminating in a scream of terror. It began like a cry of a child. It ended like the agonized scream of a woman. I stood appalled, while the wild cry died away on the echoless air. Then my blood was set tingling with dismayed excitement, as a man's voice, deep and harsh, smote my ear.

The voices came from the direction of the galloping hoofs. Filled with the impulse to act, I wheeled about and ran toward the cabin, only to find my cousin standing in bewilderment by his bed.

"What's the racket?" he asked, confusedly, but I made no answer, for, ere a reply could reach my lips, another piercing cry broke on the night, sounding farther away than had the first. The galloping horse was evidently receding.

"A woman!" cried Tom, then, as still another scream reached us, he added excitedly: "She's being murdered, Fritz! Let's go help!" and he jerked on his heavy boots, snatched up hat and pistol belt and started. I was on the ground, tugging at my own boots, but stopped him as he dashed past.

"Hold on! Get your bronco. They're horseback!"

Turning about, he ran over to where we had unpacked, and the next minute was flinging saddles, grub sacks and cooking implements about, in eager search for a bridle or hackamore, swearing like a fiend with every breath. Scrambling to my feet, hatless and with no upper garment, excepting my

undershirt, I joined him. He soon laid hold of a bridle, I of a cotton pack rope, and in a minute, regardless of the stifling heat, we were running through the hollow, toward the corral, our heavy spurs, which night and day were left buckled to our boot heels, making an uncanny jingle in the heavy air.

Both our horses were stretched out in restless sleep among the panting steers, but we unceremoniously roused them, and springing on their backs galloped out of the enclosure toward the cabin. Reaching it side by side, we whirled ourselves to the ground.

“Which is yours?” growled Tom, fumbling at the saddles. Without waiting for a reply, he seized the one nearest him, tossed it upon Buster, and, with the same breath, was jerking vigorously upon the latigo. I threw the other upon Jack, hastily adjusted it, and we mounted and were off.

Hungry and weary, our animals might well have thought themselves ridden by fiends incarnate, as they felt the merciless steel in their flanks, yet they responded promptly, and we went tearing out into the night like spirits of the black tornado. Down

a gentle dip, across the ragged ravine at its bottom, and up the succeeding rise. On top we stopped abruptly and listened—no sound, save the quick breathing of our horses, and the familiar squeak of saddle leather. Again we bounded forward. The plain was level now, and we rode for a quarter of a mile before making another halt. Still no sound of the galloping hoofs—no guiding outcry. We spurred ahead, stopping frequently to listen, but the silence remained unbroken excepting for our own thundering tread and heavy breathing.

We began to grow puzzled—perhaps the midnight rider had heard us, turned aside and let us pass. The darkness made it possible. With this thought I became conscious of a growing impression that the night had become a shade lighter. I glanced over my shoulder, and through the smoky atmosphere beheld the moon, like the great, bloodshot eye of a ghoul, staring at us over the black range to the east. Its light seemed to add gloom to the night. We pushed on for a mile. Silence still. It was strange. We had ridden at top speed, while the darkness precluded the possi-

bility of our having given an alarm before starting. Yet, unalarmed, what steed, short of a phantom, could have distanced us and swept entirely out of hearing? The thought was an uncomfortable one. Were phantoms ever known to scream? My mind was cleared of these unwholesome reflections by Tom's suggesting that we separate and advance in parallel lines, so as to cover more ground.

The heat was already telling on our horses. I swung off to the right, beginning, as the excitement of the chase waned, to feel an oppressive sense of my own discomfiture. Drawing rein in a few minutes, I listened in vain for some sound from my cousin. Buster could not be far away, and I had reason to believe that he was hitting the ground hard, yet not the faintest sound reached me. Perhaps, then, the other horse was not so far from us as we had thought. I was on the point of hailing my cousin, but thought better of it, and, instead, veered off a point to the left, thinking that I might have gone too far out of our former course.

However, I kept my face to the north, and held

Jack to his pace, well aware that it was my only means of keeping even with Tom, for, no easy horseman at any time, my cousin rode like the very devil under the stress of the night's excitement. I must have covered several miles without sound or signal from Tom, and with no indication of that for which we searched. I began to feel that I was utterly alone on that dreary waste.

The moon had, by this time, mounted high enough to lend a dim shimmer to the night. Through its sickly light I at last perceived a series of dark blotches ahead, like distant headlands rising from the mist of the sea. They multiplied, grew larger, fused with one another, and, at length, welded themselves into a ragged line across my course. A little farther and I found myself on a broken, cliff-like bank, with the plain, sweeping on in apparently unbroken stretch, at my feet.

How high the bank was there was not sufficient light to determine, so I dismounted and felt about on the ground for some missile, that I might toss it over and measure the fall. I groped about for a moment in fruitless search, then, disappointed, dropped to my knees, and began sweeping my

hands about in broadening arcs. While thus stooped, all at once I heard distinctly the sound of suppressed sobbing. I held my breath to listen. The sounds came from the plain below me. Before I could rise to an erect position, the click of a horse's feet caught my ear, and, straining my eyes, I perceived, the next minute, a dim object glide across my line of vision. Like a phantom it appeared. Like a phantom it vanished. The sounds of the walking horse, however, continued, growing fainter each second. I seemed to make no note of the foot-beats, but the sobs clung to my brain.

Once more did the heat and the fatigue take wings and fly. I flung myself into my saddle, and, turning to the left, galloped along the brow of the bank, hoping to find a break where it melted into the plain below. Fifty yards! One hundred yards! Yet no breach, and, in desperation, I turned and rode straight at the dark barrier. A wild vault, a violent plunge, a scrambling tumble, a rise, and I found myself on smooth ground, with Jack, firm and supple, under me.

Launching forth on the plain, I heard Tom's shout, and in a minute was riding beside him.

"What the devil—" he began, then recognizing me, added: "Did your horse fall?"

I told him, then acquainted him with what I had heard and seen. "The horse was walking as long as I could hear it," I explained.

"Then we'll go easy, and maybe we can make a sneak."

Accordingly we rode at a soft lope for several hundred yards, bending low on our horses' necks, so as to command the plain as far as possible, and straining our ears to listen. However, our precaution was in vain, and, after a half-mile or so with no sign of success, we began to use the spur.

Thus onward, mile after mile, through the sweltering night, we galloped. Once we both heard distinctly the sound of a stifled cry, seemingly directly ahead of us, but try as we might, we could not catch sight again of the flittering object I had seen. The entire adventure, thus far, was fraught with such weird mystery that a feeling of awe was beginning to fasten upon my mind, threatening to grow in intensity unless interrupted by some diverting circumstance.

At length it was interrupted by the appearance,

vague and mist-like at first, but gradually assuming definite outline, and taking distinct shading, of a dark belt, spanning the midnight horizon before us. It grew rapidly plainer, and we soon recognized it as timber. Tom said it could be nothing less than the wooded bottom of Mill Creek, and added that for a long stretch below the foothills it spread out, fully three miles in breadth, and was so dense as to be a veritable jungle of oak, grape-vine and underbrush.

"We must be aiming right for the thickest part," said my cousin in a tone of perplexity, "And what the deuce any mortal would be heading here for would stump Old Harry himself. Hold on! By Jingo, I remember hearing some of the boys saying there is a trail leading to the creek, from somewhere on this side."

"Should think this God-forsaken bottom would be just the spot for a fellow who wanted to hide. Gad! It gives me gooseflesh!"

"It's the best place on earth. If we can only strike that trail we'll go it a rub if we get skinned." Tom spoke almost in whispers, for we were now close to the gloomy wall of wood, stretching in for-

bidding silence across our path. Giving our horses the rein, we silently advanced. The animals had slackened their pace to a walk, and, pressing slightly to one side, unhesitatingly drew nearer the black shadows. As the upper masses of foliage began to close in, like sable clouds, above our heads, Tom spurred past me, unslinging his rifle as he did so. I followed his example. Soon we were swallowed up in almost absolute darkness. The close underbrush swept our sides, while the dense growth overhead often shut out the scanty light from the sky above; but the prompt, though devious advance of our horses proved that we had, without doubt, hit upon the trail.

We must have pushed for a mile into this black labyrinth, the tangled overgrowth seeming to become closer and hotter with every step, then, without a premonitory break in the wood, we found ourselves, all at once, free from its smothering cover, though still environed by its black border. We detected a faint sound of running water, so distant as to be at intervals inaudible, and knew that we must be in an open spot not far from Mill Creek.

“Look there!” exclaimed Tom, stopping short. As he spoke, a broad band of light suddenly flashed through the darkness before us, shone for an instant—a long, white streak across the opening, even lighting up the somber tree trunks at the edge of the wood, then was gone. A door had evidently opened and closed.

“A house!” we whispered together. The thought was a startling one to me, for I had not dreamed of finding a human habitation in that dismal spot. We held a whispered consultation, and quickly decided to dismount, tie our horses, and stealthily approach the building, hoping that we might discover some solution of the terrified cries that had brought us so far.

We unbuckled our spurs and tied them to our saddles so as to be rid of their everlasting jingle, then, with rifles in hand, started cautiously toward the spot from which the beam of light seemed to emanate. Inside of twenty feet we walked, full tilt, into a barb-wire fence. Scrambling through we found ourselves on uneven ground, dried weeds or the stalks of some low shrub rattling against our legs as we walked. Noting the constantly re-

curring depressions, I thought of plowed ground, and hastily concluded that we were in an old garden.

Soon we reached another wire fence, and, as I felt a barb sting my hand, a meager ray of light caught my eye, evidently close before us. Creeping under the lower wire, we crawled forward, on hands and knees, and soon were able to discern the regular outline of a house. The narrow beam of light seemed to come from a window, and was a good five feet from the ground.

Feeling our way with the utmost caution, we wormed ourselves, inch by inch, toward the building, stopping many times to listen. At length I could reach out my hands and touch the wall of the house. Drawing under the scar of light, we raised ourselves breathlessly to our feet. The window was closed, and shaded from within by a torn curtain, leaving a space scarcely four inches broad at the lower edge, and through this space we got a distinct view of the interior. At first the bright light was too much for our eyes, accustomed to the darkness, but in a moment they had become

adapted to the change, and we were staring spell-bound at the scene within.

It was a long room, with bare floor and wall, rude but not untidy. Opposite us was a gaping fireplace, whose mantel-piece, a single, smoke-stained board, supported the lamp which gave light to the room, and beside it an open door, leading into a darkened room beyond. Beside a rough, wooden bed, in the end of the room, nearest me, crouched the form of a girl, with face hidden in her hands, and long, disheveled hair covering her shoulders. To the right, near the middle of the apartment, stood a man with his back toward us. My eyes were fastened on the figure of the crouching girl. The convulsive movements of her lithe waist showed that she was sobbing. A scuffle of feet drew my eyes toward the man. He had turned about and was facing the girl. Involuntarily a shocked exclamation broke, in one breath, from my cousin and myself. The man was a Chinaman.

Alarmed by our sudden ejaculations, he wheeled toward us, a look of terror sweeping over his face. Then Tom uttered a furious cry, and, springing

past me, hastily ran his hand along the side of the building, until he reached the door. I followed. There was a sudden lunge, the door opened with a bang, a flood of light burst through. I saw Tom grapple with the Chinaman and hurl him to the floor, and with the crash of his fall was mingled a piercing scream.

Springing forward to lend assistance, I suddenly found the clinging arms of the girl wound about my neck, her white face close to mine. One glance into her pleading, terrified eyes told me that we had made a mistake. The next minute a woman ran from the darkness of the adjoining room, and, springing defiantly toward Tom, without a word of warning, thrust a pistol toward his head and fired. The report filled the room, and in the cloud of smoke my cousin bounded from the prostrate man toward the woman. I saw him make a sudden clutch, heard the pistol crash against the wall, as he flung it across the room; then his iron hand seized my arm, and as he jerked me through the door he growled hoarsely:

“Let’s get out of this!”

Without looking back, we made our way, as rapidly as possible, to where we had left our horses. In a moment we were in our saddles and pressing through the black jungle. Not until we were free from the gloomy wood, and once more on the open plain did either speak. Then Tom broke out with his usual vigor:

“Gosh, Fritz! That’s once we got in the wrong pew!”

“For Heaven’s sake, Tom, what kind of a nest did we light on?” I cried in bewilderment.

“A snake’s nest, with a bird in it,” replied my cousin grimly. “I know the whole story now, and the best thing we can do will be to ride to Tehama and tell the officers.”

“Tell them what?”

“That girl has been kidnapped by her mother and the Chinaman.”

“Kidnapped?”

“Yes. Expect the pigtail carried her off, and that’s why she gave us so much chin-music.”

“Do you know her?”

“Yes. Her name’s Brooks—Lillie, I think—she’s been living at Kirk’s for a year or so.”

“Where’s her home?”

“On the river below Tehama, or used to be. Her father killed a fellow a few years ago, and skinned out.”

“And that’s her mother?—the woman who wanted your scalp?”

“That’s the mother. She and the girl lived at their old place for a couple of years, then the old lady cut loose from every friend she had—ran away from her own child—and went to living with a damned, yellow Chinaman.”

“Great Heavens! A Chinaman?”

“That very cuss we saw tonight. Say, do you know I gave him a mighty good grip along the Adam’s apple before that crazy woman turned loose with her shooting-iron!”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Wish I had a chance to finish the job. What the devil did they want to gobble up the girl for? Say, didn’t she collar you?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder—she must have thought you might hurt the old woman, for she surely wouldn’t—”

"You say the father killed a man and ran away?"
I interrupted.

"Yes. Shot a fellow over some land trouble."

"Couldn't the officers find him?"

"Suppose not. They didn't anyway."

"Do you know anything about the woman before this?"

"No."

"Respectable?"

"Guess she was. I know every one was mightily horrified when she lit out with the Mongolian."

"Who was the Chinaman?"

"Who? Well, say, do you take me for a Chinese directory? He was a gardener, or peddler, or some such vermin."

"And you think a respectable wife and mother would leave her child for such a life?"

"Don't think anything—she did it, didn't she?"

"And this girl was left out in the cold?"

"Would have been if her friends hadn't taken her in."

"Well, you're a greater fool than I thought you were."

My cousin stared at me in silence.

"Respectable women don't turn aside so easy as that."

"Huh?"

"When that woman showed fight tonight, it was not for the sake of a Chinaman."

"It wasn't?"

"No."

"For whom?"

"For her husband, and the girl fastened on to me to save her father."

"How's that?"

I repeated what I had said. Tom rode in silence for twenty yards, then broke out incredulously:

"Hold on here! What's the explanation of all this wailing we've heard?"

"The girl thought she was being carried off by a full-blooded Chinaman."

"If he was her father, why the devil didn't he tell her so, and save all the uproar?"

"Probably he had planned to carry out the deception to the very last, so that if he failed she would have a doleful story to tell, and if she got away it would be still more so. This man, Brooks, is no fool, nor his wife, either."

A dozen solutions might have been found to account for some of the minor details, but of the main facts I was sure that I had discovered the true solution. For several miles we discussed the matter, though I very soon saw that Tom was of my opinion regarding it, in spite of his reluctance to admit it.

At last, when through the sickly moonlight we caught sight of the solitary cabin looming before us on the sultry plain, my cousin slapped me on the shoulder, and cried with energy:

“Damme, Fritz, you’ve outgrown your class. The minute we reach headquarters, I’m going to recommend you for honorable promotion from the school of Tenderfoots.”

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